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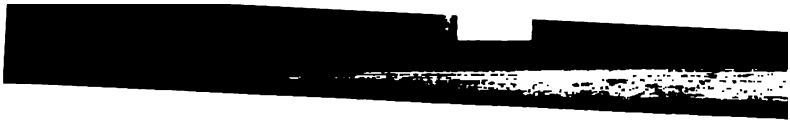

THE INTRUSIONS OF PEGGY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

A MAN OF MARK.
MR. WITT'S WIDOW.
FATHER STAFFORD.
A CHANGE OF AIR.
HALF A HERO.
THE PRISONER OF ZENDA.
THE GOD IN THE CAR.
THE DOLLY DIALOGUES.
COMEDIES OF COURTSHIP.
THE CHRONICLES OF COUNT ANTONIO.
THE HEART OF PRINCESS OSRA.
PHROSO.
SIMON DALE.
RUPERT OF HENTZAU.
THE KING'S MIRROR.
QUISANTÉ.
TRISTRAM OF BLENT.

THE
INTRUSIONS OF PEGGY

BY

ANTHONY HOPE

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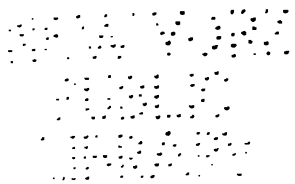

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THE INTRUSIONS OF PEGGY

CHAPTER I

LIFE IS RECOMMENDED

THE changeful April morning that she watched from the window of her flat looking over the river began a day of significance in the career of Trix Trevalla—of feminine significance, almost milliner's perhaps, but of significance all the same. She had put off her widow's weeds, and for the first time these three years back was dressed in a soft shade of blue; the harmony of her eyes and the gleams of her brown hair welcomed the colour with the cordiality of an old friendship happily renewed. Mrs. Trevalla's maid had been all in a flutter over the momentous transformation; in her mistress it bred a quietly retrospective mood. As she lay in an armchair watching the water and the clouds, she turned back on the course of her life, remembering many things. The beginning of a new era brought the old before her eyes in a protesting flash of vividness. She abandoned herself to recollections—an insidious form of dissipating the mind, which goes well with a relaxed ease of the body.

Not that Mrs. Trevalla's recollections were calculated to promote a sense of luxury, unless indeed they were to act as a provocative contrast.

There was childhood, spent in a whirling succession of lodging-houses. They had little individuality and retained hardly any separate identity; each had consisted of two

rooms with folding doors between, and somewhere, at the back or on the floor above, a cupboard for her to sleep in. There was the first baby, her brother, who died when she was six; he had been a helpless, clinging child, incapable of living without far more sympathy and encouragement than he had ever got. Luckily she had been of hardier stuff. There was her mother, a bridling, blushing, weak-kneed woman (Trix's memory was candid); kind save when her nerves were bad, and when they were, unkind in a weak and desultory fashion that did not deserve the name of cruelty. Trix had always felt less anger than contempt for her half-hysterical outbursts, and bore no malice on their account. This pale visitor soon faded—as indeed Mrs. Trevalla herself had—into non-existence, and a different picture took its place. Here was the Reverend Algernon, her father, explaining that he found himself unsuited to pastoral work and indisposed to adopt any other active calling, that inadequate means were a misfortune, not a fault, that a man must follow his temperament, and that he asked only to be allowed to go his own way—he did not add to pay it—in peace and quiet. His utterances came back with the old distinction of manner and the distant politeness with which Mr. Trevalla bore himself towards all disagreeable incidents of life—under which head there was much reason to surmise that he ranked his daughter.

Was he unjust in that? Trix was puzzled. She recalled a sturdy, stubborn, rather self-assertive child. The freshness of delicacy is rubbed off, the appeal of shyness silenced, by a hand-to-mouth existence, by a habit of regarding the leavings of the first-floor lodger in the light of windfalls, by constant flittings unmarked by the discharge of obligations incurred in the abandoned locality, by a practical outlawry from the class to which we should in the ordinary course belong. Trix decided that she must have been an unattractive girl, rather hard, too much awake to the ways of the world, readily retorting its chilliness towards her. All this was natural enough, since neither death nor poverty nor

lack of love was strange to her. Natural, yes; pleasant, no, Trix concluded, and with that she extended a degree of pardon to Mr. Trevalla. He had something to say for himself. With a smile she recalled what he always did say for himself, if anyone seemed to challenge the spotlessness of his character. On such painful occasions he would mention that he was, and had been for twenty years, a teetotaler. There were reasons in the Trevalla family history which made the fact remarkable; in its owner's eyes the virtue was so striking and enormous that it had exhausted the moral possibilities of his being, condemned other excellencies to atrophy, and left him, in the flower-show of graces, the self-complacent exhibitor of a single bloom.

Yet he had become a party to the great conspiracy; it was no less, however much motives of love, and hopes ever sanguine, might excuse it in one of the parties to it—not the Reverend Algernon. They had all been involved in it—her father, old Lady Trevalla (her husband had been a soldier and K.C.B.), Vesey Trevalla himself. Vesey loved Trix, Lady Trevalla loved Vesey in a mother's conscienceless way; the mother persuaded herself that the experiment would work, the son would not stop to ask the question. The Reverend Algernon presumably persuaded himself too—and money was very scarce. So Trix was bidden to notice—when those days at Bournemouth came back to mind, her brows contracted into a frown as though from a quick spasm of pain—how Vesey loved her, what a good steady fellow he was, how safely she might trust herself to him. Why, he was a teetotaler too! 'Yes, though his gay friends do laugh at him!' exclaimed Lady Trevalla admiringly. They were actually staying at a Temperance Hotel! The stress laid on these facts did not seem strange to an ignorant girl of seventeen, accustomed to Mr. Trevalla's solitary but eloquent virtue. Rather weary of the trait, she pouted a little over it, and then forgot it as a matter of small moment one way or the other. So the conspiracy throve, and ended in the good marriage with the well-to-do cousin, in being Mrs. Trevalla

of Trevalla Haven, married to a big, handsome, ruddy fellow who loved her. The wedding-day stood out in memory; clearest of all now was what had been no more than a faint and elusive but ever-present sense that for some reason the guests, Vesey's neighbours, looked on her with pity—the men who pressed her hand and the women who kissed her cheek. And at the last old Lady Trevalla had burst suddenly into unrestrained sobbing. Why? Vesey looked very uncomfortable, and even the Reverend Algernon was rather upset. However, consciences do no harm if they do not get the upper hand till the work is done; Trix was already Vesey's wife.

He was something of a man, this Vesey Trevalla; he was large-built in mind, equitable, kind, shrewd, of a clear vision. To the end he was a good friend and a worthy companion in his hours of reason. Trix's thoughts of him were free from bitterness. Her early life had given her a tolerance that stood her in stead, a touch of callousness which enabled her to endure. As a child she had shrugged thin shoulders under her shabby frock; she shrugged her shoulders at the tragedy now; her heart did not break, but hardened a little more. She made some ineffectual efforts to reclaim him; their hopelessness was absurdly plain; after a few months Vesey laughed at them, she almost laughed herself. She settled down into the impossible life, reproaching nobody. When her husband was sober, she never referred to what had happened when he was drunk; if he threw a plate at her then, she dodged the plate: she seemed in a sense to have been dodging plates and suchlike missiles all her life. Sometimes he had suspicions of himself, and conjured up recollections of what he had done. 'Oh, what does last night matter?' she would ask in a friendly if rather contemptuous tone. Once she lifted the veil for a moment. He found her standing by the body of her baby; it had died while he was unfit to be told, or at any rate unable to understand.

'So the poor little chap's gone,' he said softly, laying his hand on her shoulder.

'Yes, Vesey, he's gone, thank God!' she said, looking him full in the eyes.

He turned away without a word, and went out with a heavy tread. Trix felt that she had been cruel, but she did not apologise, and Vesey showed no grudge.

The odd thing about the four years her married life lasted was that they now seemed so short. Even before old Lady Trevalla's death (which happened a year after the wedding) Trix had accommodated herself to her position. From that time all was monotony—the kind of monotony which might well kill, but, failing that, left little to mark out one day from another. She did not remember even that she had been acutely miserable either for her husband or for herself; rather she had come to disbelieve in acute feelings. She had grown deadened to sorrow as to joy, and to love, the great parent of both; the hardening process of her youth had been carried further. When Vesey caught a chill and crumpled up under it as sodden men do, and died with a thankfulness he did not conceal, she was unmoved. She was not grateful for the deliverance, nor yet grieved for the loss of a friend. She shrugged her shoulders again, asking what the world was going to do with her next.

Mr. Trevalla took a view more hopeful than his daughter's, concluding that there was cause for feeling considerable satisfaction both on moral and on worldly grounds. From the higher standpoint Trix (under his guidance) had made a noble although unsuccessful effort, and had shown the fortitude to be expected from his daughter; while Vesey, poor fellow, had been well looked after to the end, and was now beyond the reach of temptation. From the lower—Mr. Trevalla glanced for a moment round the cosy apartment he now occupied at Brighton, where he was beginning to get a nice little library round him—yes, from the lower, while it was regrettable that the estate had passed to a distant cousin, Trix was left with twenty thousand pounds (in free cash, for Vesey had refused to make a settlement, since he did not know what money he would want—that is, how long he

would last) and an ascertained social position. She was only twenty-two when left a widow, and better-looking than she had ever been in her life. On the whole, were the four years misspent? Had anybody very much to grumble at? Certainly nobody had any reason to reproach himself. And he wondered why Trix had not sent for him to console her in her affliction. He was glad she had not, but he thought that the invitation would have been natural and becoming.

'But I never pretended to understand women,' he murmured, with his gentle smile.

Women would have declared that they did not understand him either, using the phrase with a bitter intention foreign to the Reverend Algernon's lips and temper. His good points were so purely intellectual—lucidity of thought, temperance of opinion, tolerance, humour, appreciation of things which deserved it. These gifts would, with women, have pleaded their rarity in vain against the more ordinary endowments of willingness to work and a capacity for thinking, even occasionally, about other people. Men liked him—so long as they had no business relations with him. But women are moralists, from the best to the worst of them. If he had lived, Trix would probably have scorned to avail herself of his counsels. Yet they might well have been useful to her in after days; he was a good taster of men. As it was, he died soon after Vesey, having caught a chill and refused to drink hot grog. That was his doctor's explanation. Mr. Trevalla's dying smile accused the man of cloaking his own ignorance by such an excuse; he prized his virtue too much to charge it with his death. He was sorry to leave his rooms at Brighton; other very strong feeling about his departure he had none. Certainly his daughter did not come between him and his preparations for hereafter, nor the thought of her solitude distract his fleeting soul.

In the general result life seemed ended for Trix Trevalla at twenty-two, and, pending release from it in the ordinary course, she contemplated an impatient and provisional existence in Continental *pensions*—establishments where a young

and pretty woman could not be suspected of wishing to reap any advantage from prettiness or youth. Hundreds of estimable ladies guarantee this security, and thereby obtain a genteel and sufficient company round their modest and inexpensive tables. It was what Trix asked for, and for two years she got it. During this period she sometimes regretted Vesey Trevalla, and sometimes asked whether vacancy were not worse than misery, or on what grounds limbo was to be preferred to hell. She could not make up her mind on this question—nor is it proposed to settle it here. Probably most people have tried both on their own account.

One evening she arrived at Paris rather late, and the isolation ward (metaphors will not be denied sometimes) to which she had been recommended was found to be full. Somewhat apprehensive, she was driven to an hotel of respectability, and, rushing to catch the flying coat-tails of *table d'hôte*, found herself seated beside a man who was apparently not much above thirty. This unwonted propinquity set her doing what she had not done for years in public, though she had never altogether abandoned the practice as a private solace: as she drank her cold soup, she laughed. Her neighbour, a shabby man with a rather shaggy beard, turned benevolently inquiring eyes on her. A moment's glance made him start a little and say, 'Surely it's Mrs. Trevalla?'

'That's my name,' answered Trix, wondering greatly, but thanking heaven for a soul who knew her. In the *pensions* they never knew who you were, but were always trying to find out, and generally succeeded the day after you went away.

'That's very curious,' he went on. 'I daresay you'll be surprised, but your photograph stands on my bedroom mantelpiece. I knew you directly from it. It was sent to me.'

'When was it sent you?' she asked.

'At the time of your marriage.' He grew grave as he spoke.

'You were his friend?'

'I called myself so.' Conversation was busy round them, yet he lowered his voice to add, 'I don't know now whether I had any right.'

'Why not?'

'I gave up very soon.'

Trix's eyes shot a quick glance at him and she frowned a little.

'Well, I ought to have been more than a friend, and so did I,' she said.

'It would have been utterly useless, of course. Reason recognises that, but then conscience isn't always reasonable.'

She agreed with a nod as she galloped through her fish, eager to overtake the *menu*.

'Besides, I have ——' He hesitated a moment, smiling apologetically and playing nervously with a knife. 'I have a propensity myself, and that makes me judge him more easily—and myself not so lightly.'

She looked at his pint of *ordinaire* with eyebrows raised.

'Oh, no, quite another,' he assured her, smiling. 'But it's enough to teach me what propensities are.'

'What is it? Tell me.' She caught eagerly at the strange luxury of intimate talk.

'Never! But, as I say, I've learnt from it. Are you alone here, Mrs. Trevalla?'

'Here and everywhere,' said Trix, with a sigh and a smile.

'Come for a stroll after dinner. I'm an old friend of Vesey's, you know.' The last remark was evidently thrown in as a concession to rules not held in much honour by the speaker. Trix said that she would come; the outing seemed a treat to her after the *pensions*.

They drank beer together on the boulevards; he heard her story, and he said many things to her, waving (as the evening wore on) a pipe to and fro from his mouth to the length of his arm. It was entirely owing to the things which he said that evening on the boulevards that she sat now in the flat over the river, her mourning doffed, her

guaranteed *pensions* forsaken, London before her, an unknown alluring sea.

'What you want,' he told her, with smiling vehemence, 'is a revenge. Hitherto you've done nothing; you've only had things done to you. You've made nothing; you've only been made into things yourself. Life has played with you; go and play with it.'

Trix listened, sitting very still, with eager eyes. There was a life, then—a life still open to her; the door was not shut, nor her story of necessity ended.

'I daresay you'll scorch your fingers; for the fire burns. But it's better to die of heat than of cold. And if trouble comes, call at 6A Danes Inn.'

'Where in the world is Danes Inn?' she asked, laughing.

'Between New and Clement's, of course.' He looked at her in momentary surprise, and then laughed. 'Oh, well, not above a mile from civilisation—and a shilling cab from aristocracy. I happen to lodge there.'

She looked at him curiously. He was shabby yet rather distinguished, shaggy but clean. He advised life, and he lived in Danes Inn, where an instinct told her that life would not be a very maddening or riotous thing.

'Come, you must live again, Mrs. Trevalla,' he urged.

'Do you live, as you call it?' she asked, half in mockery, half in a genuine curiosity.

A shade of doubt, perhaps of distress, spread over his face. He knocked out his pipe deliberately before answering.

'Well, hardly, perhaps.' Then he added eagerly, 'I work, though.'

'Does that do instead?' To Trix's new-born mood the substitute seemed a poor one.

'Yes—if you have a propensity.'

What was his tone? Sad or humorous, serious or mocking? It sounded all.

'Oh, work's your propensity, is it?' she cried gaily and scornfully, as she rose to her feet. 'I don't think it's mine, you know.'

He made no reply, but turned away to pay for the beer. It was a trifling circumstance, but she noticed that at first he put down three *sous* for the waiter, and then returned to the table in order to make the tip six. He looked as if he had done his duty when he had made it six.

They walked back to the hotel together and shook hands in the hall.

'6A Danes Inn?' she asked merrily.

'6A Danes Inn, Mrs. Trevalla. Is it possible that my advice is working?'

'It's working very hard indeed—as hard as you work. But Danes Inn is only a refuge, isn't it?'

'It's not fit for much more, I fear.'

'I shall remember it. And now, as a formality—and perhaps as a concession to the postman—who are you?'

'My name is Airey Newton.'

'I never heard Vesey mention you.'

'No, I expect not. But I knew him very well. I'm not an impostor, Mrs. Trevalla.'

'Why didn't he mention you?' asked Trix. Vesey had been, on the whole, a communicative man.

He hesitated a moment before he answered.

'Well, I wrote to him on the subject of his marriage,' he confessed at last.

She needed no more.

'I see,' she said, with an understanding nod. 'Well, that was—honest of you. Good night, Mr. Newton.'

This meeting—all their conversation—was fresh and speaking in her brain as she sat looking over the river in her recovered gown of blue. But for the meeting, but for the shabby man and what he had said, there would have been no blue gown, she would not have been in London nor in the flat. He had brought her there, to do something, to make something, to play with life as life had played with her, to have a revenge, to die, if die she must, of heat rather than of cold.

Well, she would follow his advice—would accept and

fulfil it amply. 'At the worst there are the *pensions* again —and there's Danes Inn!'

She laughed at that idea, but her laugh was rather hard, her mouth a little grim, her eyes mischievous. These were the marks youth and the four years had left. Besides, she cared for not a soul on earth.

CHAPTER II

COMING NEAR THE FIRE

At the age of forty (a point now passed by some half-dozen years) Mrs. Bonfill had become motherly. The change was sudden, complete, and eminently wise. It was accomplished during a summer's retirement; she disappeared a queen regnant, she reappeared a dowager—all by her own act, for none had yet ventured to call her *passée*. But she was a big woman, and she recognised facts. She had her reward. She gained power instead of losing it; she had always loved power, and had the shrewdness to discern that there was more than one form of it. The obvious form she had never, as a young and handsome woman, misused or over-used; she had no temptations that way, or, as her friend Lady Blixworth preferred to put it, 'In that respect dearest Sarah was always *bourgeoise* to the core.' The new form she now attained—influence—was more to her taste. She liked to shape people's lives; if they were submissive and obedient she would make their fortunes. She needed some natural capacities in her *protégés*, of course; but, since she chose cleverly, these were seldom lacking. Mrs. Bonfill did the rest. She could open doors that obeyed no common key; she could smooth difficulties; she had in two or three cases blotted out a past, and once had reformed a gambler. But she liked best to make marriages and Ministers. Her own daughter, of course, she married immediately—that was nothing. She had married Nellie Towler to Sir James Quinby-Lee—the betting had been ten to one against it—and Lady Mildred Haughton to Frank Cleveland—flat in the

face of both the families. As for Ministers, she stood well with Lord Farringham, was an old friend of Lord Glentorly, and, to put it unkindly, had Constantine Blair fairly in her pocket. It does not do to exaggerate drawing-room influence, but when Beaufort Chance became a Whip, and young Lord Mervyn was appointed Glentorly's Under-Secretary at the War Office, and everybody knew that they were Mrs. Bonfill's last and prime favourites—well, the coincidence was remarkable. And never a breath of scandal with it all! It was no small achievement for a woman born in, bred at, and married from an unpretentious villa at Streatham. *La carrière ouverte*—but perhaps that is doing some injustice to Mr. Bonfill. After all, he and the big house in Grosvenor Square had made everything possible. Mrs. Bonfill loved her husband, and she never tried to make him a Minister; it was a well-balanced mind, save for that foible of power. He was very proud of her, though he rather wondered why she took so much trouble about other people's affairs. He owned a brewery, and was Chairman of a railway company.

Trix Trevalla had been no more than a month in London when she had the great good fortune to be taken up by Mrs. Bonfill. It was not everybody's luck. Mrs. Bonfill was particular; she refused hundreds, some for her own reasons, some because of the things Viola Blixworth might say. The Frickers, for example, failed in their assault on Mrs. Bonfill—or had up to now. Yet Mrs. Bonfill herself would have been good-natured to the Frickers.

'I can't expose myself to Viola by taking up the Frickers,' she explained to her husband, who had been not indisposed, for business reasons, to do Fricker a good turn. For Lady Blixworth, with no other qualities very striking to a casual observer, and with an appearance that the term 'elegant' did ample justice to, possessed a knack of describing people whom she did not like in a way that they did not like—a gift which made her respected and, on the whole, popular.

'The woman's like a bolster grown fat; the daughter's like a sausage filled unevenly; and the man—well, I wouldn't have him to a political party!'

Thus had Lady Blixworth dealt with the Frickers, and even Mrs. Bonfill quailed.

It was very different with Trix Trevalla. Pretty, presentable, pleasant, even witty in an unsubtle sort of fashion, she made an immediate success. She was understood to be well-off too; the flat was not a cheap one; she began to entertain a good deal in a quiet way; she drove a remarkably neat brougham. These things are not done for nothing —nor even on the interest of twenty thousand pounds. Yet Trix did them, and nobody asked any questions except Mrs. Bonfill, and she was assured that Trix was living well within her means. May not 'means' denote capital as well as income? The distinction was in itself rather obscure to Trix, and, Vesey Trevalla having made no settlement, there was nothing to drive it home. Lastly, Trix was most prettily docile and submissive to Mrs. Bonfill —grateful, attentive, and obedient. She earned a reward. Any woman with half an eye could see what that reward should be.

But for once Mrs. Bonfill vacillated. After knowing Trix a fortnight she destined her for Beaufort Chance, who had a fair income, ambition at least equal to his talents, and a chance of the House of Lords some day. Before she had known Trix a month—so engaging and docile was Trix— Mrs. Bonfill began to wonder whether Beaufort Chance were good enough. Certainly Trix was making a very great success. What then? Should it be Mervyn, Mrs. Bonfill's prime card, her chosen disciple? A man destined, as she believed, to go very high—starting pretty high anyhow, and starts in the handicap are not to be disregarded. Mrs. Bonfill doubted seriously whether, in that mental book she kept, she could not transfer Trix to Mervyn. If Trix went on behaving well—— But the truth is that Mrs. Bonfill herself was captured by Trix. Yet Trix feared Mrs. Bonfill,

even while she liked and to some extent managed her. After favouring Chance, Mrs. Bonfill began to put forward Mervyn. Whether Trix's management had anything to do with this result it is hard to say.

Practical statesmen are not generally blamed for such changes of purpose. They may hold out hopes of, say, a reduction of taxation to one class or interest, and ultimately award the boon to another. Nobody is very severe on them. But it comes rather hard on the disappointed interest, which, in revenge, may show what teeth it has.

Trix and Mervyn were waltzing together at Mrs. Bonfill's dance. Lady Blixworth sat on a sofa with Beaufort Chance and looked on—at the dance and at her companion.

'She's rather remarkable,' she was saying in her idle languid voice. 'She was meant to be vulgar, I'm sure, but she contrives to avoid it. I rather admire her.'

'A dangerous shade of feeling to excite in you, it seems,' he remarked sourly.

The lady imparted an artificial alarm to her countenance.

'I'm so sorry if I said anything wrong; but, oh, surely, there's no truth in the report that you're——?' A motion of her fan towards Trix ended the sentence.

'Not the least,' he answered gruffly.

Sympathy succeeded alarm. With people not too clever. Lady Blixworth allowed herself a liberal display of sympathy. It may have been all right to make Beaufort a Whip (though that question arose afterwards in an acute form), but he was no genius in a drawing-room.

'Dear Sarah talks so at random sometimes,' she drawled. 'Well-meant, I know, Beaufort; but it does put people in awkward positions, doesn't it?'

He was a conceited man, and a pink-and-white one. He flushed visibly and angrily.

'What has Mrs. Bonfill been saying about me?'

'Oh, nothing much; it's just her way. And you mustn't resent it—you owe so much to her.' Lady Blixworth was enjoying herself; she had a natural delight in mischief,

especially when she could direct it against her beloved and dreaded Sarah with fair security.

'What did she say?'

'Say! Nothing, you foolish man! She diffused an impression.'

'That I——?'

'That you liked Mrs. Trevalla! She was wrong, I suppose. *Voilà tout*, and, above all, don't look hot and furious; the room's stifling as it is.'

Beaufort Chance was furious. We forgive much ill-treatment so it is secret, we accept many benefits on the same understanding. To parade the benefit and to let the injustice leak out are the things that make us smart. Lady Blixworth had by dexterous implication accused Mrs. Bonfill of both offences. Beaufort had not the self-control to seem less angry than he was. 'Surely,' thought Lady Blixworth, watching him, 'he's too stupid even for politics!'

'You may take it from me,' he said pompously, 'that I have, and have had, no more than the most ordinary acquaintance with Mrs. Trevalla.'

She nodded her head in satisfied assent. 'No, he's just stupid enough,' she concluded, smiling and yawning behind her fan. She had no compunctions—she had told nearly half the truth. Mrs. Bonfill never gossiped about her Ministers—it would have been fatal—but she was sometimes rather expansive on the subject of her marriages; she was tempted to collect opinions on them; she had, no doubt, (before she began to vacillate) collected two or three opinions about Beaufort Chance and Trix Trevalla.

Trix's brain was whirling far quicker than her body turned in the easy swing of the waltz. It had been whirling this month back, ever since the prospect began to open, the triumphs to dawn, ambition to grow, a sense of her attraction and power to come home to her. The *pensions* were gone; she had plunged into life. She was delighted and dazzled. Herself, her time, her feelings, and her money, she flung into the stream with a lavish recklessness. Yet behind

the gay intoxication of the transformed woman she was conscious still of the old self, the wide-awake, rather hard girl, that product of the lodging-houses and the four years with Vesey Trevalla. Amid the excitement, the success, the folly, the old voice spoke, cautioning, advising, never allowing her to forget that there was a purpose and an end in it all, a career to make and to make speedily. Her eyes might wander to every alluring object; they returned to the main chance. Wherefore Mrs. Bonfill had no serious uneasiness about dear Trix; when the time came she would be sensible; people fare, she reflected, none the worse for being a bit hard at the core.

'I like sitting here,' said Trix to Mervyn after the dance, 'and seeing everybody one's read about or seen pictures of. Of course I don't really belong to it, but it makes me feel as if I did.'

'You'd like to?' he asked.

'Well, I suppose so,' she laughed as her eyes rambled over the room again.

Lord Mervyn was conscious of his responsibilities. He had a future; he was often told so in public and in private, though it is fair to add that he would have believed it unsolicited. That future, together with the man who was to have it, he took seriously. And, though of rank unimpeachable, he was not quite rich enough for that future; it could be done on what he had, but it could be done better with some more. Evidently Mrs. Bonfill had been captured by Trix; as a rule she would not have neglected the consideration that his future could be done better with some more. He had not forgotten it; so he did not immediately offer to make Trix really belong to the brilliant world she saw. She was very attractive, and well-off, as he understood, but she was not, from a material point of view, by any means what he had a right to claim. Besides, she was a widow, and he would have preferred that not to be the case.

'Prime Ministers and things walking about like flies!' sighed Trix, venting satisfaction in a pardonable exaggeration.

It was true, however, that Lord Farringham had looked in for half an hour, talked to Mrs. Bonfill for ten minutes, and made a tour round, displaying a lofty cordiality which admirably concealed his desire to be elsewhere.

'You'll soon get used to it all,' Mervyn assured her with a rather superior air. 'It's a bore, but it has to be done. The social side can't be neglected, you see.'

'If I neglected anything, it would be the other, I think.'

He smiled tolerantly and quite believed her. Trix was most butterfly-like to-night; there was no hardness in her laugh, not a hint of grimness in her smile. 'You would never think,' Mrs. Bonfill used to whisper, 'what the poor child has been through.'

Beaufort Chance passed by, casting a scowling glance at them.

'I haven't seen you dancing with Chance—or perhaps you sat out? He's not much of a performer.'

'I gave him a dance, but I forgot.'

'Which dance, Mrs. Trevalla?' Her glance had prompted the question.

'Ours,' said Trix. 'You came so late—I had none left.'

'I very seldom dance, but you tempted me.' He was not underrating his compliment. For a moment Trix was sorely inclined to snub him; but policy forbade. When he left her, to seek Lady Blixworth, she felt rather relieved.

Beaufort Chance had watched his opportunity, and came by again with an accidental air. She called to him and was all graciousness and apologies; she had every wish to keep the second string in working order. Beaufort had not sat there ten minutes before he was in his haste accusing Lady Blixworth of false insinuations—unless, indeed, Trix were an innocent instrument in Mrs. Bonfill's hands. Trix was looking the part very well.

'I wish you'd do me a great kindness,' he said presently. 'Come to dinner some day.'

'Oh, that's a very tolerable form of benevolence. Of course I will.'

'Wait a bit. I mean—to meet the Frickers.'

'Oh!' Meeting the Frickers seemed hardly an inducement.

But Beaufort Chance explained. On the one side Fricker was a very useful man to stand well with; he could put you into things—and take you out at the right time. Trix nodded sagely, though she knew nothing about such matters. On the other hand—Beaufort grew both diplomatic and confidential in manner—Fricker had little ambition outside his business, but Mrs. and Miss Fricker had enough and to spare—ambitions social for themselves, and, subsidiary thereunto, political for Fricker.

'Viola Blixworth has frightened Mrs. Bonfill,' he complained. 'Lady Glentorly talks about drawing the line, and all the rest of them are just as bad. Now if you'd come——'

'Me? What good should I do? The Frickers won't care about me.'

'Oh, yes, they will!' He did not lack adroitness in baiting the hook for her. 'They know you can do anything with Mrs. Bonfill; they know you're going to be very much in it. You won't be afraid of Viola Blixworth in a month or two! I shall please Fricker—you'll please the women. Now do come.'

Trix's vanity was flattered. Was she already a woman of influence? Beaufort Chance had the other lure ready too.

'And I daresay you don't mind hearing of a good thing if it comes in your way?' he suggested carelessly. 'People with money to spare find Fricker worth knowing, and he's absolutely square.'

'Do you mean he'd make money for me?' asked Trix, trying to keep any note of eagerness out of her voice.

'He'd show you how to make it for yourself, anyhow.'

Trix sat in meditative silence for a few moments. Presently she turned to him with a bright friendly smile.

'Oh, never mind all that! I'll come for your sake—to please you,' she said.

Beaufort Chance was not quite sure that he believed her this time, but he looked as if he did—which serves just as well in social relations. He named a day, and Trix gaily accepted the appointment. There were few adventures, not many new things, that she was not ready for just now. The love of the world had laid hold of her.

And here at Mrs. Bonfill's she seemed to be in the world up to her eyes. People had come on from big parties as the evening waned, and the last hour dotted the ball-room with celebrities. Politicians in crowds, leaders of fashion, an actress or two, an Indian prince, a great explorer—they made groups which seemed to express the many-sidedness of London, to be the thousand tributaries that swell the great stream of its society. There was a little unusual stir to-night. A foreign complication had arisen, or was supposed to have arisen. People were asking what the Tsar was going to do; and, when one considers the reputation for secrecy enjoyed by Russian diplomacy, quite a surprising number of them seemed to know, and told one another with an authority only matched by the discrepancy between their versions. When they saw a man who possibly might know —Lord Glentorly—they crowded round him eagerly, regardless of the implied aspersion on their own knowledge. Glentorly had been sitting in a corner with Mrs. Bonfill, and she shared in his glory, perhaps in his private knowledge. But both Glentorly and Mrs. Bonfill professed to know no more than there was in the papers, and insinuated that they did not believe that. Everybody at once declared that they had never believed that, and had said so at dinner, and the very wise added that it was evidently inspired by the Stock Exchange. A remark to this effect had just fallen on Trix's ears when a second observation from behind reached her.

'Not one of them knows a thing about it,' said a calm, cool, youthful voice.

'I can't think why they want to,' came as an answer in rich pleasant tones.

Trix glanced round and saw a smart, trim young man,

and by his side a girl with beautiful hair. She had only a glimpse of them, for in an instant they disentangled themselves from the gossipers and joined the few couples who were keeping it up to the last dance.

It will be seen that Beaufort Chance had not given up the game; Lady Blixworth's pin-pricks had done the work which they were probably intended to do: they had incited him to defy Mrs. Bonfill, to try to win off his own bat. She might discard him in favour of Mervyn, but he would fight for himself. The dinner to which he bade Trix would at once assert and favour intimacy; if he could put her under an obligation it would be all to the good; flattering her vanity was already a valuable expedient. That stupidity of his, which struck Viola Blixworth with such a sense of its density, lay not in misunderstanding or misvaluing the common motives of humanity, but in considering that all humanity was common: he did not allow for the shades, the variations, the degrees. Nor did he appreciate in the least the mood that governed or the temper that swayed Trix Trevalla. He thought that she preferred him as a man, Mervyn as a match. Both of them were, in fact, at this time no more than figures in the great *ballet* at which she now looked on, in which she meant soon to mix.

Mrs. Bonfill caught Trix as she went to her carriage—that smart brougham was in waiting—and patted her cheek *more materno*.

'I saw you were enjoying yourself, child,' she said. What was all that Beaufort had to say to you?'

'Oh, just nonsense,' answered Trix lightly.

Mrs. Bonfill smiled amiably.

'He's not considered to talk nonsense generally,' she said; 'but perhaps there was someone you wanted to talk to more! You won't say anything, I see, but—Mortimer stayed late! He's coming to luncheon to-morrow. Won't you come too?'

'I shall be delighted,' said Trix. Her eyes were sparkling. She had possessed wit enough to see the vacillation of

Mrs. Bonfill. Did this mean that it was ended? The invitation to lunch looked like it. Mrs. Bonfill believed in lunch for such purposes. In view of the invitation to lunch, Trix said nothing about the invitation to dinner.

As she was driven from Grosvenor Square to the flat by the river, she was marvellously content—enjoying still, not thinking, wondering, not feeling, making in her soul material and sport of others, herself seeming not subject to design or accident. The change was great to her; the ordinary mood of youth that has known only good fortune seemed to her the most wonderful of transformations, almost incredible. She exulted in it and gloated over the brightness of her days. What of others? Well, what of the players in the pantomime? Do they not play for us? What more do we ask of or about them? Trix was not in the least inclined to be busy with more fortunes than her own. For this was the thing—this was what she had desired.

How had she come to desire it so urgently and to take it with such recklessness? The words of the shabby man on the boulevards came back to her. 'Life has played with you; go and play with it. You may scorch your fingers; for the fire burns. But it's better to die of heat than of cold.'

'Yes, better of heat than of cold,' laughed Trix Trevalla triumphantly, and she added, 'If there's anything wrong, why, he's responsible!' She was amused both at the idea of anything being wrong and at the notion of holding the quiet shabby man responsible. There could be no link between his life and the world she had lived in that night. Yet, if he held these views about the way to treat life, why did he not live? He had said he hardly lived, he only worked. Trix was in an amused puzzle about the shabby man as she got into bed; he actually put the party and its great *ballet* out of her head.

CHAPTER III

IN DANES INN

SOME men maintained that it was not the quantity, nor the quality, nor the colour of Peggy Ryle's hair that did the mischief, but simply and solely the way it grew. Perhaps (for the opinion of men in such matters is eminently and consciously fallible) it did not grow that way at all, but was arranged. The result to the eye was the same, a peculiar harmony between the waves of the hair, the turn of the neck, and the set of the head. So notable and individual a thing was this agreement that Arthur Kane and Miles Childwick, poet and critic, were substantially at one about it. Kane described it as 'the artistry of accident,' Childwick lauded its 'meditated spontaneity.' Neither gentleman was ill-pleased with his phrase, and each professed a polite admiration of the other's effort—these civilities are necessary in literary circles. Other young men painted or drew the hair, and the neck, and the head, till Peggy complained that her other features were neglected most disdainfully. Other young men again, not endowed with the gift of expression by tongue or by hand, contented themselves with swelling Peggy's court. She did not mind how much they swelled it. She had a fine versatility, and could be flirted with in rhyme, in polished periods, in modern slang, or in the deaf-and-dumb alphabet; the heart is, of course, the thing in such a matter, various forms of expression no more than its interpreters. Meanwhile Peggy learnt men and their manners, caused a good deal of picturesque misery—published and unpublished—and immensely increased the amenity of life wherever she went.

And she went everywhere, when she could pay a cab fare and contrive a frock, or borrow one or both of these commodities. (Elfreda Flood, for instance, often had a frock.) She generally returned the cab fare, and you could usually regain the frock by personal exertions; it was not considered the correct thing to ask her directly for either. She had an income of forty pounds a year, and professed to be about to learn to paint in real earnest. There was also an uncle in Berlin who sent cheques at rare and irregular intervals. When a cheque came, Peggy gave a dinner-party; when there had been no cheque for a long while, Peggy accepted a dinner. That was all the difference it made. And anyhow there was always bread-and-butter to be had at Airey Newton's. Airey appeared not to dine, but there was tea and there was bread-and-butter—a thing worth knowing now and then to Peggy Ryle.

She had been acquainted with Airey Newton for two years—almost since her first coming to London. Theirs was a real and intimate friendship, and her figure was familiar to the dingy house whose soft-stone front had crumbled into a premature old age. Airey was on the third floor, front and back; two very large windows adorned his sitting-room—it was necessary to give all encouragement and opportunity to any light that found its way into the gloomy *cul-de-sac*. Many an afternoon Peggy sat by one of these windows in a dilapidated wicker arm-chair, watching the typewriting clerk visible through the corresponding big window opposite. Sometimes Airey talked, oftener he went on with his work as though she were not there; she liked this inattention as a change. But she was a little puzzled over that work of his. He had told her that he was an inventor. So far she was content, and when she saw him busy with models or working out sums she concluded that he was at his trade. It did not appear to be a good trade, for he was shabby, the room was shabbier, and (as has been mentioned) he did not, so far as her observation went, dine. But probably it kept him happy; she had always pictured inventors as blissful

although poverty-stricken persons. The work-table then, a big deal one which blocked the other window, was intelligible enough. The mystery lay in the small table on the right hand of the fireplace; under it stood a Chubb's safe, and on it reposed a large book covered in red leather and fastened with a padlock. She had never seen either book or safe open, and when she had asked what was in them, Airey told her a little story about a Spartan who was carrying something under his cloak—a mode of retort which rather annoyed her. So she inquired no more. But she was sure that the locks were unfastened when she was gone. What was there? Was he writing a great book? Or did he own ancestral plate? Or precious—and perhaps scandalous—documents? Something precious there must be; the handsomeness of the book, the high polish by which the metal of the safe shamed the surrounding dustiness, stood out sure signs and proofs of that.

Peggy had just bought a new frock—and paid for it under some pressure—and a cheque had not come for ever so long; so she ate bread-and-butter steadily and happily, interrupting herself only to pour out more tea. At last Airey pushed away his papers and models, saying, 'That's done, thank heaven!' and got up to light his pipe. Peggy poured out a cup of tea for him, and he came across the room for it. He looked much as when he had met Trix Trevalla in Paris, but his hair was shorter and his beard trimmed close and cut to a point; these improvements were due to Peggy's reiterated entreaties.

'Well?' he asked, standing before her, his eyes twinkling kindly.

'Times are hard, but the heart is light, Airey. I've been immortalised in a sonnet——'

'Dissected in an essay too?' he suggested with ironical admiration.

'I don't recognise myself there. And I've had an offer——'

'Another?'

'Not that sort—an offer of a riding-horse. But I haven't got a habit.'

'Nor a stable perhaps?'

'No, nor a stable. I didn't think of that. And you, Airey?'

'Barring the horse, and the sonnet, and the essay, I'm much as you are, Peggy.'

She threw her head back a little and looked at him; her tone, while curious, was also slightly compassionate.

'I suppose you get some money for your things sometimes?' she asked. 'I mean, when you invent a—a—well, say a corkscrew, they give you something?'

'Of course. I make my living that way. He smiled faintly at the involuntary glance from Peggy's eyes that played round the room. 'Yesterday's again!' he exclaimed suddenly, taking up the loaf. 'I told Mrs. Stryver I wouldn't have a yesterday's!' His tone was indignant; he seemed anxious to vindicate himself.

'It won't be to-morrow's, anyhow,' laughed Peggy, regarding the remaining and much diminished fragment in his hand. 'It wasn't badly stale.'

Airey took his pipe out of his mouth and spoke with the abruptness of a man who has just made up his mind to speak.

'Do you know a Mrs. Trevalla?' he asked.

'Oh, yes; by sight very well.'

'How does she strike you?'

'Well—certainly pretty; probably clever; perhaps—— Is she a friend of yours?'

'I've known about her a long while and met her once.'

'Once! Well, then, perhaps unscrupulous.'

'Why do you think she's unscrupulous?'

'Why do you ask me about her?' retorted Peggy.

'She's written to me, proposing to come and see me.'

'Have you asked her? I can't have you having a lot of visitors, you know. I come here for quiet.'

Airey looked a little embarrassed. 'Well, I did give her

a sort of general invitation,' he murmured, fingering his beard. 'That is, I told her to come if—if she was in any difficulty.' He turned an appealing glance towards Peggy's amused face. 'Have you heard of her being in any difficulty?'

'No; but I should think it's not at all unlikely.'

'Why?'

'Have you ever had two people in love with you at the same time?'

'Never, on my honour,' said Airey with obvious sincerity.

'If you had, and if you were as pleasant as you could be to both of them, and kept them going by turns, and got all you could out of both of them, and kept on like that for about two months——'

'Oh, that's how the land lies, is it?'

'Don't you think it possible you might be in a difficulty some day?'

'But, good heavens, that's not the sort of thing to bring to me!'

'Apparently Mrs. Trevalla thinks differently,' laughed Peggy. 'At least I can't think of any other difficulty she's likely to be in.'

Airey was obviously disturbed and displeased.

'If what you say is true,' he observed, 'she can't be a good sort of woman.'

'I suppose not.' Peggy's admission sounded rather reluctant.

'Who are the two men?'

'Lord Mervyn and Beaufort Chance.'

'M.P.'s, aren't they?'

'Among other things, Airey. Well, you can't tell her not to come, can you? After that sort of general invitation, you know.' Peggy's tone was satirical; she had rather strong views as to the way in which men made fools of themselves over women—or sometimes said she had.

'I was an old friend of her husband's.'

'Oh, you've nothing to apologise for. When does she want to come?'

'To-morrow. I say, oughtn't I to offer to go and call on her?'

'She'd think that very dull in comparison,' Peggy assured him. 'Let her come and sob out her trouble here.'

'You appear to be taking the matter in a flippant spirit, Peggy.'

'I don't think I'm going to be particularly sorry if Mrs. Trevalla is in a bit of a scrape.'

'You young women are so moral.'

'I don't care,' said Peggy defiantly.

'Women have an extraordinary gift for disliking one another on sight,' mused Airey in an injured voice.

'You seem to have liked Mrs. Trevalla a good deal on sight.'

'She looked so sad, so solitary, a mere girl in her widow's weeds.' His tone grew compassionate, almost tender, as he recalled the forlorn figure which had timidly stolen into the dining-room of the Paris hotel.

'You'll find her a little bit changed perhaps,' Peggy suggested with a suppressed malice that found pleasure in anticipating his feelings.

'Oh, well, she must come anyhow, I suppose.'

'Yes, let her come, Airey. It does these people good to see how the poor live.'

Airey laughed, but not very heartily. However, it was well understood that everybody in their circle was very poor, and Peggy felt no qualms about referring to the fact.

'I shall come the next day and hear all about the interview. Fancy these interesting things happening to you! Because, you know, she's rather famous. Mrs. Bonfill has taken her up, and the Glentorlys are devoted to her, and Lady Blixworth has said some of her best things about her. She'll bring you into touch with fashion.'

'Hang fashion!' said Airey. 'I wonder what her difficulty is.' He seemed quite preoccupied with the idea of Mrs. Trevalla's difficulty.

'I see you're going to be very romantic indeed,' laughed Peggy Ryle.

His eyes dwelt on her for a moment, and a very friendly expression filled them.

'Don't you get into any difficulties?' he said.

'There's never but one with me,' she laughed; 'and that doesn't hurt, Airey.'

There was a loud and cheerful knock on the door.

'Visitors! When people come, how do you account for me?'

'I say nothing. I believe you're taken for my daughter.'

'Not since you trimmed your beard! Well, it doesn't matter, does it? Let him in.'

The visitor proved to be nobody to whom Peggy needed to be accounted for; he was Tommy Trent, the smart, trim young man who had danced with her at Mrs. Bonfill's party.

'You here again!' he exclaimed in tones of grave censure, as he laid down his hat on the top of the red-leather book on the little table. He blew on the book first, to make sure it was not dusty.

Peggy smiled, and Airey relit his pipe. Tommy walked across and looked at the *débris* of the loaf. He shook his head when Peggy offered him tea.

A sudden idea seemed to occur to him.

'I'm awfully glad to find you here,' he remarked to her. 'It saves me going up to your place, as I meant. I've got some people dining to-night, and one of them's failed. I wonder if you'd come? I know it's a bore coming again so soon, but——'

'I haven't been since Saturday.'

'But it would get me out of a hole.' He spoke in humble entreaty.

'I'd come directly, but I'm engaged.'

Tommy looked at her sorrowfully, and, it must be added, sceptically.

'Engaged to dinner and supper,' averred Peggy with

emphasis as she pulled her hat straight and put on her gloves.

'You wouldn't even look in between the two and—and have an ice with us?'

'I really can't eat three meals in one evening, Tommy.'

'Oh, chuck one of them. You might, for once!'

'Impossible! I'm dining with my oldest friend,' smiled Peggy. 'I simply can't.' She turned to Airey, giving him her hand with a laugh. 'I like you best, because you just let me——'

Both words and laughter died away; she stopped abruptly, looking from one man to the other. There was something in their faces that arrested her words and her merriment. She could not analyse what it was, but she saw that she had made both of them uncomfortable. They had guessed what she was going to say; it would have been painful to one of them, and the other knew it. But whom had she wounded—Tommy by implying that his hospitality was importunate and his kindness clumsy, or Airey by a renewed reference to his poverty as shown in the absence of pressing invitations from him? She could not tell; but a constraint had fallen on them both. She cut her farewell short and went away, vaguely vexed and penitent for an offence which she perceived but did not understand.

The two men stood listening a moment to her light footfall on the stairs.

'It's all a lie, you know,' said Tommy. 'She isn't engaged to dinner or to supper either. It's beastly, that's what it is.'

'Yours was all a lie too, I suppose?' Airey spoke in a dull hard voice.

'Of course it was, but I could have beaten somebody up in time, or said they'd caught influenza, or been given a box at the opera, or something.'

Airey sat down by the fireplace, his chin sunk on his necktie. He seemed unhappy and rather ashamed. Tommy glanced at him with a puzzled look, shook his head, and

then broke into a smile—as though, in the end, the only thing for it was to be amused. Then he drew a long envelope from his pocket.

'I've brought the certificates along,' he said. 'Here they are. Two thousand. Just look at them. It's a good thing; and if you sit on it for a bit, it'll pay for keeping.' He laid the envelope on the small table by Airey's side, took up his hat, put it on, and lit a cigarette as he repeated, 'Just see they're all right, old chap.'

'They're sure to be right.' Airey shifted uncomfortably in his chair and pulled at his empty pipe.

Tommy tilted his hat far back on his head, turned a chair back foremost, and sat down on it, facing his friend.

'I'm your business man,' he remarked. 'I do your business and I hold my tongue about it. Don't I?

'Like the tomb,' Airey acknowledged.

'And—— Well, at any rate let me congratulate you on the bread-and-butter. Only—only, I say, she'd have dined with you, if you'd asked her, Airey.'

His usually composed and unemotional voice shook for an almost imperceptible moment.

'I know,' said Airey Newton. He rose, unlocked the safe, and threw the long envelope in. Then he unlocked the red-leather book, took a pen, made a careful entry in it, re-locked it, and returned to his chair. He said nothing more, but he glanced once at Tommy Trent in a timid way. Tommy smiled back in recovered placidity. Then they began to talk of inventions, patents, processes, companies, stocks, shares, and all manner of things that produce or have to do with money.

'So far, so good,' ended Tommy. 'And if the oxygen process proves commercially practicable—it's all right in theory, I know—I fancy you may look for something big.' He threw away his cigarette and stood up, as if to go. But he lingered a moment, and a touch of embarrassment affected his manner. Airey had quite recovered his confidence and happiness during the talk on money matters.

'She didn't tell you any news, I suppose?' Tommy asked.

'What, Peggy? No, I don't think so. Well, nothing about herself, anyhow.'

'It's uncommonly wearing for me,' Tommy complained with a pathetic look on his clear-cut healthy countenance. 'I know I must play a waiting game; if I said anything to her now I shouldn't have a chance. So I have to stand by and see the other fellows make the running. By Jove, I lie awake at nights—some nights, anyhow—imagining infernally handsome poets—— Old Arty Kane isn't handsome, though! I say, Airey, don't you think she's got too much sense to marry a poet? You told me I must touch her imagination. Do I look like touching anybody's imagination? I'm about as likely to do it as—as you are.' His attitude towards the suggested achievement wavered between envy and scorn.

Airey endured this outburst—and its concluding insinuation—with unruffled patience. He was at his pipe again, and puffed out wisdom securely vague.

'You can't tell with a girl. It takes them all at once sometimes. Up to now I think it's all right.'

'Not Arty Kane?'

'Lord, no!'

'Nor Childwick? He's a clever chap, Childwick. Not got a *sou*, of course; she'd starve just the same.'

'She'd have done it before if it had been going to be Miles Childwick.'

'She'll meet some devilish fascinating chap some day, I know she will.'

'He'll ill-use her perhaps,' Airey suggested hopefully.

'Then I shall nip in, you mean? Have you been treating yourself to Drury Lane?'

Airey laughed openly, and presently Tommy himself joined in, though in a rather rueful fashion.

'Why the deuce can't we just like 'em?' he asked.

'That would be all right on the pessimistic theory of the world.'

'Oh, hang the world! Well, good-bye, old chap. I'm glad you approve of what I've done about the business.'

His reference to the business seemed to renew Airey Newton's discomfort. He looked at his friend, and after a long pause said solemnly:

'Tommy Trent!'

'Yes, Airey Newton!'

'Would you mind telling me—man to man—how you contrive to be my friend?'

'What?'

'You're the only man who knows—and you're my only real friend.'

'I regard it as just like drinking,' Tommy explained, after a minute's thought. 'You're the deuce of a good fellow in every other way. I hope you'll be cured some day too. I may live to see you bankrupt yet.'

'I work for it. I work hard and usefully.'

'And even brilliantly,' added Tommy.

'It's mine. I haven't robbed anybody. And nobody has any claim on me.'

'I didn't introduce this discussion.' Tommy was evidently pained. He held out his hand to take leave.

'It's an extraordinary thing, but there it is,' mused Airey. He took Tommy's hand and said, 'On my honour I'll ask her to dinner.'

'Where?' inquired Tommy, in a suspicious tone.

Airey hesitated.

'Magnifique?' said Tommy firmly and relentlessly.

'Yes, the—the Magnifique,' agreed Airey, after another pause.

'Delighted, old man!' He waited a moment longer, but Airey Newton did not fix a date.

Airey was left sorrowful, for he loved Tommy Trent. Though Tommy knew his secret, still he loved him—a fact that may go to the credit of both men. Many a man in Airey's place would have hated Tommy, even while he used and relied on him; for Tommy's knowledge put Airey to shame

—a shame he could not stifle any more than he could master the thing that gave it birth.

Certainly Tommy deserved not to be hated, for he was very loyal. He showed that only two days later, and at a cost to himself. He was dining with Peggy Ryle—not she with him; for a cheque had arrived, and they celebrated its coming. Tommy, in noble spirits (the coming of a cheque was as great an event to him as to Peggy herself), told her how he had elicited the offer of a dinner from Airey Newton; he chuckled in pride over it.

How men misjudge things! Peggy sat up straight in her chair and flushed up to the outward curve of her hair.

'How dare you?' she cried. 'As if he hadn't done enough for me already! I must have eaten pounds of butter—of mere butter alone! You know he can't afford to give dinners.'

Besides anger, there was a hint of pride in her emphasis on 'dinners.'

'I believe he can,' said Tommy, with the air of offering a hardy conjecture.

'I know he can't, or of course he would. Do you intend to tell me that Airey—Airey of all men—is mean?'

'Oh, no, I—I don't say——'

'It's you that's mean! I never knew you do such a thing before. You've quite spoilt my pleasure this evening.' She looked at him sternly. 'I don't like you at all to-night. I'm very grievously disappointed in you.'

Temptation raged in Tommy Trent; he held it down manfully.

'Well, I don't suppose he'll give the dinner, anyhow,' he remarked morosely.

'No, because he can't; but you'll have made him feel miserable about it. What time is it? I think I shall go home.'

'Look here, Peggy; you aren't doing me justice.'

'Well, what have you got to say?'

Tommy, smoking for a moment or two, looked across at her and answered, 'Nothing.'

She rose and handed him her purse.

'Pay the bill, please, and mind you give the waiter half-a-crown. And ask him to call me a cab, please.'

'It's only half a mile, and it's quite fine.'

'A rubber-tired hansom, please, with a good horse.'

Tommy put her into the cab and looked as if he would like to get in too. The cabman, generalising from observed cases, held the reins out of the way, that Tommy's tall hat might mount in safety.

'Tell him where to go, please. Good-night,' said Peggy.

Tommy was left on the pavement. He walked slowly along to his club, too upset to think of having a cigar.

'Very well,' he remarked, as he reached his destination. 'I played fair, but old Airey shall give that dinner—I'm hanged if he sha'n't!—and do it as if he liked it too!'

A vicious chuckle surprised the hall-porter as Tommy passed within the precincts.

Peggy drove home, determined to speak plainly to Airey himself; that was the only way to put it right.

'He shall know that I do him justice, anyhow,' said she. Thanks to the cheque, she was feeling as the rich feel, or should feel, towards those who have helped them in early days of struggle; she experienced a generous glow and meditated delicate benevolence. At least the bread-and-butter must be recouped an hundredfold.

So great is the virtue of twenty pounds, if only they happen to be sent to the right address. Most money, however, seems to go astray.

CHAPTER IV

'FROM THE MIDST OF THE WHIRL'

'REALLY I must congratulate you on your latest, Sarah,' remarked Lady Blixworth, who was taking tea with Mrs. Bonfill. 'Trix Trevalla is carrying everything before her. The Glentorlys have had her to meet Lord Farringham, and he was delighted. The men adore her, and they do say women like her. All done in six weeks! You're a genius!'

Mrs. Bonfill made a deprecatory gesture of a *Non nobis* order. Her friend insisted amiably:

'Oh, yes, you are. You choose so well. You never make a mistake. Now do tell me what's going to happen. Does Mortimer Mervyn mean it? Of course she wouldn't hesitate.'

Mrs. Bonfill looked at her volatile friend with a good-humoured distrust.

'When you congratulate me, Viola,' she said, 'I generally expect to hear that something has gone wrong.'

'Oh, you believe what you're told about me,' the accused lady murmured plaintively.

'It's experience,' persisted Mrs. Bonfill. 'Have you anything that you think I sha'n't like to tell me about Trix Trevalla?'

I don't suppose you'll dislike it, but I should. Need she drive in the park with Mrs. Fricker?' Her smile contradicted the regret of her tone, as she spread her hands out in affected surprise and appeal.

'Mrs. Fricker's a very decent sort of woman, Viola. You have a prejudice against her.'

'Yes, thank heaven! We all want money nowadays, but for my part I'd starve sooner than get it from the Frickers.'

'Oh, that's what you want me to believe?'

'Dearest Sarah, no! That's what I'm afraid her enemies and yours will say.'

'I see,' smiled Mrs. Bonfill indulgently. She always acknowledged that Viola was neat—as a siege-gun might admit it of the field artillery.

'Couldn't you give her a hint? The gossip about Beaufort Chance doesn't so much matter, but——' Lady Blixworth looked as if she expected to be interrupted, even pausing an instant to allow the opportunity. Mrs. Bonfill obliged her.

'There's gossip about Beaufort, is there?'

'Oh, there is, of course—that can't be denied; but it really doesn't matter as long as Mortimer doesn't hear about it.'

'Was there never more than one aspirant at a time when you were young?'

'As long as you're content, I am,' Lady Blixworth declared in an injured manner. 'It's not my business what Mrs. Trevalla does.'

'Don't be huffy,' was Mrs. Bonfill's maternal advice. 'As far as I can see, everything is going splendidly.'

'It is to be Mortimer?'

'How can I tell, my dear? If Mortimer Mervyn should ask my advice, which really isn't likely, what could I say except that Trix is a charming woman, and that I know of nothing against it?'

'She must be very well off, by the way she does things.' There was an inflection of question in her voice, but no direct interrogatory.

'Doubtless,' said Mrs. Bonfill. Often the craftiest suggestions failed in face of her broad imperturbability.

Lady Blixworth smiled at her. Mrs. Bonfill shook her head in benign rebuke. The two understood one another, and on the whole liked one another very well.

'All right, Sarah,' said Lady Blixworth; 'but if you want my opinion, it is that she's out-running the constable, unless——'

'Well, go on.'

'You give me leave? You won't order me out? Well, unless—— Well, as I said, why drive Mrs. Fricker round the Park? Why take Connie Fricker to the Quinby-Lees's dance?'

'Oh, everybody goes to the Quinby-Lees's. She's never offered to bring them here or anywhere that matters.'

'You know the difference; perhaps the Frickers don't.'

'That's downright malicious, Viola. And of course they do; at least they live to find it out. No, you can't put me out of conceit with Trix Trevalla.'

'You're so loyal,' murmured Lady Blixworth in admiration. 'Really Sarah's as blind as a bat sometimes,' she reflected as she got into her carriage.

A world of people at once inquisitive and clear-sighted would render necessary either moral perfection or reckless defiance; indifference and obtuseness preserve a place for that mediocrity of conduct which characterises the majority. Society at large had hitherto found small fault with Trix Trevalla, and what it said, when passed through Lady Blixworth's resourceful intellect, gained greatly both in volume and in point. No doubt she had very many gowns, no doubt she spent money, certainly she flirted, possibly she was, for so young and pretty a woman, a trifle indiscreet. But she gave the impression of being able to take care of herself, and her attractions, combined with Mrs. Bonfill's unwavering patronage, would have sufficed to excuse more errors than she had been found guilty of. It was actually true that, while men admired, women liked her. There was hardly a discordant voice to break in harshly on her triumph.

There is no place like the top—especially when it is narrow, and will not hold many at a time. The natives of it have their peculiar joy, those who have painfully climbed theirs. Trix Trevalla seemed, to herself at least, very near the top;

if she were not quite on it, she could put her head up over the last ledge and see it, and feel that with one more hoist she would be able to land herself there. It is unnecessary to recite the houses she went to, and would be (save for the utter lack of authority such a list would have) invidious; it would be tiresome to retail compliments and conquests. But the smallest, choicest gatherings began to know her, and houses which were not fashionable but something much beyond—eternal pillars supporting London society—welcomed her. This was no success of curiosity, of whim, of a season; it was the establishment of a position for life. From the purely social point of view, even a match with Mervyn could do little more. So Trix was tempted to declare in her pride.

But the case had other aspects, of course. It was all something of a struggle, however victorious; it may be supposed that generally it is. Security is hard to believe in, and there is always a craving to make the strong position impregnable. Life alone at twenty-six is—lonely. These things were in her mind, as they might have been in the thoughts of any woman so placed. There was another consideration, more special to herself, which could not be excluded from view: she had begun to realise what her manner of life cost. Behold her sitting before books and bills that revealed the truth beyond possibility of error or of gloss! Lady Blixworth's instinct had not been at fault. Trix's mouth grew rather hard again, and her eyes coldly resolute, as she studied these disagreeable documents.

From such studies she had arisen to go to dinner with Beaufort Chance and to meet the Frickers. She sat next Fricker, and talked to him most of the time, while Beaufort was very attentive to Mrs. Fricker, and the young man who had been procured for Connie Fricker fulfilled his appointed function. Fricker was not a bad-looking man, and was better bred and less aggressive than his wife or daughter. Trix found him not so disagreeable as she had expected; she encouraged him to talk on his own subjects, and began to find him interesting; by the end of dinner she had

discovered that he, or at least his conversation, was engrossing. The old theme of making money without working for it, by gaming or betting, by chance or speculation, by black magic or white, is ever attractive to the children of men. Fricker could talk very well about it; he produced the impression that it was exceedingly easy to be rich; it seemed to be anybody's own fault if he were poor. Only at the end did he throw in any qualification of this broad position.

'Of course you must know the ropes, or find somebody who does.'

'There's the rub, Mr. Fricker. Don't people who know them generally keep their knowledge to themselves?'

'They've a bit to spare for their friends sometimes.' His smile was quietly reflective.

Beaufort Chance had hinted that some such benevolent sentiments might be found to animate Mr. Fricker. He had even used the idea as a bait to lure Trix to the dinner. Do what she would, she could not help giving Fricker a glance, half-grateful, half-provocative. Vanity—new-born of her great triumph—made her feel that her presence there was really a thing to be repaid. Her study of those documents tempted her to listen when the suggestion of repayment came. In the drawing-room Trix found herself inviting Mrs. Fricker to call. Youthful experiences made Trix socially tolerant in one direction if she were socially ambitious in another. She had none of Lady Blixworth's shudders, and was ready to be nice to Mrs. Fricker. Still her laugh was conscious, and she blushed a little when Beaufort Chance thanked her for making herself so pleasant.

All through the month there were renewed and continual rumours of what the Tsar meant to do. A speech by Lord Farringham might seem to dispose of them, but there were people who did not trust Lord Farringham—who, in fact, knew better. There were telegrams from abroad, there were mysterious paragraphs claiming an authority too high to be disclosed to the vulgar, there were leaders asking whether it were actually the fact that nothing was going to be done;

there was an agitation about the Navy, another final exposure of the methods of the War Office, and philosophic attacks on the system of party government. Churchmen began to say that they were also patriots, and dons to remind the country that they were citizens. And—in the end—what did the Tsar mean to do? That Potentate gave no sign. What of that? Had not generals uttered speeches and worked out professional problems? Lord Glentorly ordered extensive manœuvres, and bade the country rely on him. The country seemed a little doubtful; or, anyhow, the Press told it that it was. 'The atmosphere is electric,' declared Mr. Liffey in an article in 'The Sentinel': thousands read it in railway carriages and looked grave; they had not seen Mr. Liffey's smile.

Things were in this condition, and the broadsheets blazing in big letters, when one afternoon a hansom whisked along Wych Street and set down a lady in a very neat grey frock at the entrance of Danes Inn. Trix trod the pavement of that secluded spot and ascended the stairs of 6A with an amusement and excitement far different from Peggy Ryle's matter-of-fact familiarity. She had known lodging-houses; they were as dirty as this, but there the likeness ended. They had been new, flimsy, confined; this looked old, was very solid and relatively spacious; they had been noisy, it was very quiet; they had swarmed with children, here were none; the whole place seemed to her quasi-monastic; she blushed for herself as she passed through. Her knock on Airey Newton's door was timid.

Airey's amazement at the sight of her was unmistakable. He drew back saying:

'Mrs. Trevalla! Is it really you?'

The picture he had in his mind was so different. Where was the forlorn girl in the widow's weeds? This brilliant creature surely was not the same!

But Trix laughed and chattered, insisting that she was herself.

'I couldn't wear mourning all my life, could I?' she asked. 'You didn't mean me to, when we had our talk in Paris?'

'I'm not blaming, only wondering.' For a moment she almost robbed him of speech; he busied himself with the tea (there was a cake to-day) while she flitted about the room, not omitting to include Airey himself in her rapid scrutiny. She marked the shortness of his hair, the trimness of his beard, and approved Peggy's work, little thinking it was Peggy's.

'It's delightful to be here,' she exclaimed as she sat down to tea.

'I took your coming as a bad omen,' said Airey, smiling; 'but I hope there's nothing very wrong?'

'I'm an impostor. Everything is just splendidly right, and I came to tell you.'

'It was very kind.' He had not quite recovered from his surprise yet.

'I thought you had a right to know. I owe it all to your advice, you see. You told me to come back to life. Well, I've come.'

She was alive enough, certainly; she breathed animation and seemed to diffuse vitality; she was positively eager in her living.

'You told me to have my revenge, to play with life. Don't you remember? Fancy your forgetting, when I've remembered so well! To die of heat rather than of cold —surely you remember, Mr. Newton?'

'Every word, now you say it,' he nodded. 'And you're acting on that?'

'For all I'm worth,' laughed Trix.

He sat down opposite her, looking at her with a grave but still rather bewildered attention.

'And it works well?' he asked after a pause, and, as it seemed, a conscientious examination of her.

'Superb!' She could not resist adding, 'Haven't you heard anything about me?'

'In here?' asked Airey, waving his arm round the room, and smiling.

'No, I suppose you wouldn't,' she laughed; 'but I'm rather famous, you know. That's why I felt bound to come and tell you—to let you see what great things you've done. Yes, it's quite true, you gave me the impulse.' She set down her cup and leant back in her chair, smiling brightly at him. 'Are you afraid of the responsibility?'

'Everything seems so prosperous,' said Airey. 'I forgot, but I have heard one person speak of you. Do you know Peggy Ryle?'

'I know her by sight. Is she a friend of yours?'

'Yes, and she told me of some of your triumphs.'

'Oh, not half so well as I shall tell you myself!' Trix was evidently little interested in Peggy Ryle. To Airey himself Peggy's doubts and criticism seemed now rather absurd; this bright vision threw them into the shade of neglect.

Trix launched out. It was the first chance she had enjoyed of telling to somebody who belonged to the old life the wonderful things about the new. Indeed who else of the old life was left? Graves, material or metaphorical, covered all that had belonged to it. Mrs. Bonfill was always kind, but with her there was not the delicious sense of the contrast that must rise before the eyes of the listener. Airey gave her that; he had heard of the lodging-houses, he knew about the four years with Vesey Trevalla; it was evident he had not forgotten the forlornness and the widow's weeds of Paris. He then could appreciate the change, the great change, that still amazed and dazzled Trix herself. It was not in ostentation, but in the pure joy of victory, that she flung great names at him, would have him know that the highest of them were familiar to her, and that the woman who now sat talking to him, friend to friend, amidst the dinginess of Danes Inn, was a sought-after, valued, honoured guest in all these houses. Peggy Ryle went to some of the houses also, but she had never considered that talk about them would interest Airey

Newton. She might be right or wrong—Trix Trevalla was certainly right in guessing that talk about herself in the houses would.

'You seem to be going it, Mrs. Trevalla,' he said at last, unconsciously reaching out for his pipe.

'I am,' said Trix. 'Yes, do smoke. So will I.' She produced her cigarette-case. 'Well, I've arrears to make up, haven't I?' She glanced round. 'And you live here?' she asked.

'Always. I know nothing of all you've been talking about.'

'You wouldn't care about it, anyhow, would you?' Her tones were gentle and consolatory. She accepted the fact that it was all impossible to him, that the door was shut, and comforted him in his exclusion.

'I don't suppose I should, and at all events——' He shrugged his shoulders. If her impression had needed confirmation, here it was. 'And what's to be the end of it with you?' he asked.

'End? Why should there be an end? It's only just begun,' cried Trix.

'Well, there are ends that are beginnings of other things,' he suggested. What Peggy had told him recurred to his mind, though certainly there was no sign of Mrs. Trevalla being in trouble on that or any other score.

Yet his words brought a shadow to Trix's face, a touch of irritation into her manner.

'Oh, some day, I daresay,' she said. 'Yes, I suppose so. I'm not thinking about that either just now. I'm just thinking about myself. That's what you meant me to do?'

'It seems to me that my responsibility is growing, Mrs. Trevalla.'

'Yes, that's it; it is!' Trix was delighted with the whimsicality of the idea. 'You're responsible for it all, though you sit quietly here and nobody knows anything about you. I shall come and report myself from time to time. I'm obedient up to now?'

'Well, I'm not quite sure. Did I tell you to——?'

'Yes, yes, to take my revenge, you know. Oh, you remember, and you can't shirk it now.' She began to laugh at the half-humorous gravity of Airey's face, as she insisted on his responsibility. This talk with him, the sort of relations that she was establishing with him, promised to give a new zest to her life, a pleasant diversion for her thoughts. He would make a splendid onlooker, and she would select all the pleasant things for him to see. Of course there was nothing really unpleasant, but there were a few things that it would not interest him to hear. There were things that even Mrs. Bonfill did not hear, although she would have been able to understand them much better than he.

Trix found her host again looking at her with an amused and admiring scrutiny. She was well prepared for it; the most select of parties had elicited no greater care in the choice of her dress than this visit to Danes Inn. Was not the contrast to be made as wonderful and striking as possible?

'Shall I do you credit?' she asked in gay mockery.

'You're really rather marvellous,' laughed Airey. 'And I suppose you'll come out all right.'

A hint of doubt crept into his voice. Trix glanced at him quickly.

'If I don't, you'll have to look after me,' she warned him.

He was grave now, not solemn, but, as it seemed, meditative.

'What if I think only of myself too?' he asked.

Trix laughed at the idea. 'There'd be no sort of excuse for you,' she reminded him.

'I suppose not,' he admitted, rather ruefully.

'But I'm going to come out most splendidly all right, so we won't worry about that.' As she spoke she had been putting on her gloves, and now she rose from her chair. 'I must go; got an early dinner and a theatre.' She looked round the room, and then back to Airey; her lips parted in an appealing confidential smile that drew an answer from

him, and made him feel what her power was. 'Do you know, I don't want—I positively don't want—to go, Mr. Newton.'

'The attractions are so numerous, so unrivalled?'

'It's so quiet, so peaceful, so out of it all.'

'That a recommendation to you?' He raised his brows.

'Well, it's all a bit of a rush and a fight, and—and so on. I love it all, but just now and then'—she came to him and laid her hand lightly on his arm—'just now and then may I come again?' she implored. 'I shall like to think that I've got it to come to.'

'It's always here, Mrs. Trevalla, and, except for me, generally empty.'

'Generally?' Her mocking tone hid a real curiosity; but Airey's manner was matter-of-fact.

'Oh, Peggy Ryle comes, and one or two of her friends, now and then. But I could send them away. Any time's the same to them.'

'Miss Ryle comes? She's beautiful, I think; don't you?'

'Now am I a judge? Well, yes, I think Peggy's attractive.'

'Oh, you're all hypocrites! Well, you must think me attractive too, or I won't come.'

It was a long while since Airey Newton had been flirted with. He recognised the process, however, and did not object to it; it also appeared to him that Trix did it very well.

'If you come, I shall think you most attractive.'

Trix relapsed into sincerity and heartiness. 'I've enjoyed coming awfully,' she said. Airey found the sincerity no less attractive. 'I shall think about you.'

'From the midst of the whirl?'

'Yes, from the midst of the whirl! Good-bye.'

She left behind her a twofold and puzzling impression. There was the woman of the world, with airs and graces a trifle elaborate, perhaps, in their prettiness, the woman

steeped in society, engrossed with its triumphs, fired with its ambitions. But there had been visible from time to time, or had seemed to peep out, another woman, the one who had come to see her friend, had felt the need of talking it all over with him, of sharing it and getting sympathy in it, and who had in the end dropped her graces and declared with a frank heartiness that she had enjoyed coming 'awfully.' Airey Newton pulled his beard and smoked a pipe over these two women, as he sat alone. With some regret he came to the conclusion that as a permanent factor, as an influence in guiding and shaping Trix Trevalla's life, the second woman would not have much chance against the first. Everything was adverse to the second woman in the world in which Trix lived.

And he had sent her to that world? So she declared, partly in mockery perhaps, enjoying the incongruity of the idea with his dull life, his dingy room, his shabby coat. Yet he traced in the persistence with which she had recurred to the notion something more than mere chaff. The idea might be fanciful or whimsical, but there it was in her mind, dating from their talk at Paris. Unquestionably it clung to her, and in some vague way she based on it an obligation on his part, and thought it raised a claim on hers, a claim that he should not judge her severely or condemn the way she lived; perhaps, more vaguely still, a claim that he should help her if ever she needed help.

CHAPTER V

THE WORLD RECALCITRANT

BEAUFORT CHANCE was no genius in a drawing-room—that may be accepted on Lady Blixworth's authority. In concluding that he was a fool in the general affairs of life she went beyond her premises and her knowledge. Mrs. Bonfill, out of a larger experience, had considered that he would do more than usually well; he was ingenious, hard-working, and conciliatory, of affable address and sufficient tact; Mrs. Bonfill seemed to have placed him with judgment, and Mr. Dickinson (who led the House) was content with his performances. Yet perhaps after all he was, in the finest sense of the term, a fool. He could not see how things would look to other people, if other people came to know them; he hardly perceived when he was sailing very near the wind; the probability of an upset did not occur to him. He saw with his own eyes only; their view was short, and perhaps awry.

Fricker was his friend; he had bestowed favours on Fricker, or at least on Fricker's belongings, for whose debts Fricker assumed liability. If Fricker were minded to repay the obligation, was there any particular harm in that? Beaufort could not see it. If, again, the account being a little more than squared, he in his turn equalised it, leaving Fricker's kindness to set him at a debit again, and again await his balancing, what harm? It seemed only the natural way of things when business and friendship went hand in hand. The Frickers wanted one thing, he wanted another. If each could help the other to the desired object,

good was done to both, hurt to nobody. Many things are private which are not wrong; delicacy is different from shame, reticence from concealment. These relations between himself and Fricker were not fit subjects for gossip, but Beaufort saw no sin in them. Fricker, it need not be added, was clearly, and even scornfully, of the same opinion.

But Fricker's business affairs were influenced, indeed most materially affected, by what the Tsar meant to do, and by one or two kindred problems then greatly exercising the world of politics, society, and finance. Beaufort Chance was not only in the House, he was in the Government. Humbly in, it is true, but actually. Still, what then? He was not in the Cabinet. Did he know secrets? He knew none; of course he would never have used secrets or divulged them. Things told to him, or picked up by him, were *ex hypothesi* not secrets, or he would never have come to know them. Fricker had represented all this to him, and, after some consideration and hesitation, Fricker's argument had seemed very sound.

Must a man be tempted to argue thus or to accept such arguments? Beaufort scorned the idea, but, lest he should have been in error on this point, it may be said that there was much to tempt him. He was an extravagant man; he sat for an expensive constituency; he knew (his place taught him still better) the value of riches—of real wealth, not of a beggarly competence. He wanted wealth and he wanted Trix Trevalla. He seemed to see how he could work towards the satisfaction of both desires at the same time and along the same lines. Mervyn was his rival with Trix—every day made that plain. He had believed himself on the way to win till Mervyn was brought on the scene—by Mrs. Bonfill, whom he now began to hate. Mervyn had rank and many other advantages. To fight Mervyn every reinforcement was needed. As wealth tempted himself, so he knew it would and must tempt Trix; he was better informed as to her affairs than Mrs. Bonfill, and shared Lady Blixworth's opinion about them.

Having this opinion, and a lively wish to ingratiate himself with Trix, he allowed her to share in some of the benefits which his own information and Fricker's manipulation of the markets brought to their partnership. Trix, conscious of money slipping away, very ready to put it back, reckless and ignorant, was only too happy in the opportunity. She seemed also very grateful, and Beaufort was encouraged to persevere. For a little while his kindness to Trix escaped Fricker's notice, but not for long. As soon as Fricker discovered it, his attitude was perfectly clear and, to himself, no more than reasonable.

'You've every motive for standing well with Mrs. Trevalla, I know, my dear fellow,' said he, licking his big cigar and placing his well-groomed hat on Beaufort's table. 'But what motive have I? Everybody we let in means one more to share the—the profit—perhaps, one might add, to increase the risk. Now why should I let Mrs. Trevalla in? Any more than, for instance, I should let—shall we say—Mrs. Bonfill in?' Fricker did not like Mrs. Bonfill since she had quailed before Viola Blixworth.

'Oh, if you take it like that!' muttered Beaufort crossly.

'I don't take it any way. I put the case. It would be different if Mrs. Trevalla were a friend of mine or of my family.'

That was pretty plain for Fricker. As a rule Mrs. Fricker put the things plainly to him, and he transmitted them considerably disguised and carefully wrapped in his dry humour. On this occasion he allowed his hint to be fairly obvious; he knew Beaufort intimately by now.

Beaufort looked at him, feeling rather uncomfortable.

'Friends do one another good turns; I don't go about doing them to anybody I meet, just for fun,' continued Fricker.

Beaufort nodded a slow assent.

'Of course we don't bargain with a lady,' smiled Fricker, thoughtfully flicking off his ash. 'But, on the other hand, ladies are very quick to understand. Eh, Beaufort? I

daresay you could convey—— ?' He stuck the cigar back into his mouth.

This was the conversation that led to the little dinner-party hereinbefore recorded; Fricker had gone to it not doubting that Trix Trevalla understood; Mrs. Fricker did not doubt it either when Trix had been so civil in the drawing-room. Trix herself had thought she ought to be civil, as has been seen; it may, however, be doubted whether Beaufort Chance had made her understand quite how much a matter of business the whole thing was. She did not realise that she, now or about to be a social power, was to do what Lady Blixworth would not and Mrs. Bonfill dared not —was to push the Frickers, to make their cause hers, to open doors for them, and in return was to be told when to put money in this stock or that, and when to take it out again. She was told when to do these things, and did them. The money rolled in, and she was wonderfully pleased. If it would go on rolling in like this, its rolling out again (as it did) was of no consequence; her one pressing difficulty seemed in a fair way to be removed. Something she did for the Frickers; she got them some minor invitations, and asked them to meet some minor folk, and thought herself very kind. Now and then they seemed to hint at more, just as now and then Beaufort Chance's attentions became inconveniently urgent. On such occasions Trix laughed and joked and evaded, and for the moment wriggled out of any pledge. As regards the seemliness of the position, her state of mind was very much Beaufort's own; she saw no harm in it, but she did not talk about it; some people were stupid, others malicious. It was, after all, a private concern. So she said nothing to anybody—not even to Mrs. Bonfill. There was little sign of Airey Newton's 'second woman' in her treatment of this matter; the first held undivided sway.

If what the Tsar meant to do and the kindred problems occupied Fricker in one way, they made no less claim on Mervyn's time in another. He was very busy in his office and in the House; he had to help Lord Glentorly to persuade

the nation to rely on him. Still he made some opportunities for meeting Trix Trevalla; she was always very ready to meet him when Beaufort Chance and Fricker were not to the fore. He was a man of methodical mind, which he made up slowly. He took things in their order, and gave them their proper proportion of time. He was making his career. It could hardly be doubted that he was also paying attentions, and it was probable that he meant to pay his addresses, to Trix Trevalla. But his progress was leisurely; the disadvantages attaching to her perhaps made him slower, even though in the end he would disregard them. In Trix's eyes he was one or two things worse than leisurely. He was very confident and rather condescending. On this point she did speak to Mrs. Bonfill, expressing some impatience. Mrs. Bonfill was sympathetic as always, but also, as always, wise.

'Well, and if he is, my dear?' Her smile appealed to Trix to admit that everything which she had been objecting to and rebelling against was no more than what any woman of the world would expect and allow for.

Trix's expression was still mutinous. Mrs. Bonfill proceeded with judicial weightiness.

'Now look at Audrey Pollington—you know that big niece of Viola's? Do you suppose that, if Mortimer paid her attentions, she'd complain of him for being condescending? She'd just thank her stars, and take what she could get.' (These very frank expressions are recorded with an apology.)

'I'm not Audrey Pollington,' muttered Trix, using a weak though common argument.

There are moments when youth is the better for a judicious dose of truth.

'My dear,' remarked Mrs. Bonfill, 'most people would say that what Audrey Pollington didn't mind, you needn't.' Miss Pollington was grand-daughter to a duke (female line), and had a pretty little fortune of her own. Mrs. Bonfill could not be held wrong for seeking to temper her young friend's arrogance.

'It's not my idea of making love, that's all,' said Trix obstinately.

'We live and learn.' Mrs. Bonfill implied that Trix had much to learn. 'Don't lose your head, child,' she added warningly. 'You've made plenty of people envious. Don't give them any chance.' She paused before she asked, 'Do you see much of Beaufort now?'

'A certain amount.' Trix did not wish to be drawn on this point.

'Well, Trix?'

'We keep friends,' smiled Trix.

'Yes, that's right. I wouldn't see too much of him, though.'

'Till my lord has made up his mind?'

'Silly!' That one word seemed to Mrs. Bonfill sufficient answer. She had, however, more confidence in Trix than the one word implied. Young women must be allowed their moods, but most of them acted sensibly in the end; that was Mrs. Bonfill's experience.

Trix came and kissed her affectionately; she was fond of Mrs. Bonfill and really grateful to her; it is possible, besides, that she had twinges of conscience; her conversations with Mrs. Bonfill were marked by a good deal of reserve. It was all very well to say that the matters reserved did not concern Mrs. Bonfill, but even Trix in her most independent mood could not feel quite convinced of this. She knew—though she tried not to think of it—that she was playing a double game; in one side of it Mrs. Bonfill was with her and she accepted that lady's help; the other side was sedulously hidden. It was not playing fair. Trix might set her teeth sometimes and declare she would do it, unfair though it was; or more often she would banish thought altogether by a plunge into amusement; but the thought and the consciousness were there. Well, she was not treating anybody half as badly as most people had treated her. She hardened her heart and went forward on her dangerous path, confident that she could keep clear of pitfalls. Only—yes, it was all

rather a fight; once or twice she thought of Danes Inn with a half-serious yearning for its quiet and repose.

Some of what Mrs. Bonfill did not see Lady Blixworth did—distantly, of course, and mainly by putting an observed two together with some other observed but superficially unrelated two—a task eminently congenial to her mind. Natural inclination was quickened by family duty. 'I wish,' Lady Blixworth said, 'that Sarah would have undertaken dear Audrey; but since she won't, I must do the best I can for her myself.' It was largely with a view to doing the best she could for Audrey that Lady Blixworth kept her eye on Trix Trevalla—a thing of which Trix was quite unconscious. Lady Blixworth's motives command respect, and it must be admitted that Miss Pollington did not render her relative's dutiful assistance superfluous. She was a tall, handsome girl, rather inert, not very ready in conversation. Lady Blixworth, who was never absurd even in praise, pitched on the epithet 'statuesque' as peculiarly suitable. Society acquiesced. 'How statuesque Miss Pollington is!' became the thing to say to one's neighbour or partner. Lady Blixworth herself said it with a smile sometimes; most people, content as ever to accept what is given to them, were grave enough.

Audrey herself was extremely pleased with the epithet, so delighted, indeed, that her aunt thought it necessary to administer a caution.

'When people praise you or your appearance for a certain quality, Audrey dear,' she observed sweetly, 'it generally means that you've got that quality in a marked degree.'

'Yes, of course, Aunt Viola,' said Audrey, rather surprised, but quite understanding.

'And so,' pursued Aunt Viola in yet more gentle tones, 'it isn't necessary for you to cultivate it consciously.' She stroked Audrey's hand with much affection. 'Because they tell you you're statuesque, for instance, don't try to go about looking like the Venus of Milo in a pair of stays.'

'I'm sure I don't, Auntie,' cried poor Audrey, blushing

piteously. She was conscious of having posed a little bit as Mr. Guise, the eminent sculptor, passed by.

'On the contrary, it does no harm to remember that one has a tendency in a certain direction; then one is careful to keep a watch on oneself and not overdo it. I don't want you to skip about, my dear, but you know what I mean.'

Audrey nodded rather ruefully. What is the good of being statuesque if you may not live up to it?

'You aren't hurt with me, darling?' cooed Aunt Viola.

Audrey declared she was not hurt, but she felt rather bewildered.

With the coming of June, affairs of the heart and affairs of the purse became lamentably and unpoetically confounded in Trix Trevalla's life and thoughts. Mrs. Bonfill was hinting prodigiously about Audrey Pollington; Lady Blixworth was working creditably hard, and danger undoubtedly threatened from that quarter. Trix must exert herself if Mervyn were not to slip through the meshes. On the other hand, the problems were rather acute. Lord Farringham had been decidedly pessimistic in a speech in the House of Lords, Fricker was hinting at a great *coup*, Beaufort Chance was reminding her in a disagreeably pressing fashion of how much he had done for her and of how much he still could do. Trix had tried one or two little gambles on her own account and met with serious disaster; current expenses rose rather than fell. In the midst of all her gaiety Trix grew a little careworn and irritable; a line or two showed on her face; critics said that Mrs. Trevalla was doing too much, and must be more careful of her looks. Mrs. Bonfill began to be vaguely uncomfortable about her favourite. But still Trix held on her way, her courage commanding more admiration than any other quality she manifested at this time. Indeed she had moments of clear sight about herself, but her shibboleth of 'revenge' still sufficed to stiffen, if not to comfort, her.

Some said that Lord Farringham's pessimistic speech was meant only for home consumption, the objects being to

induce the country to spend money freely and also to feel that it was no moment for seeking to change the Crown's responsible advisers. Others said that it was intended solely for abroad, either as a warning or, more probably, as an excuse to enable a foreign nation to retire with good grace from an untenable position. A minority considered that the Prime Minister had perhaps said what he thought. On the whole there was considerable uneasiness.

'What does it all mean, Mr. Fricker?' asked Trix, when that gentleman called on her, cool, alert, and apparently in very good spirits.

'It means that fools are making things smooth for wise men, as usual,' he answered, and looked at her with a keen glance.

'If you will only make them plain to one fool!' she suggested with a laugh.

'I presume you aren't interested in international politics as such?'

'Not a bit,' said Trix heartily.

'But if there's any little venture going——' He smiled as he tempted her, knowing that she would yield.

'You've been very kind to me,' murmured Trix.

'It's a big thing this time—and a good thing. You've heard Beaufort mention the Dramoffsky Concessions, I daresay?'

Trix nodded.

'He'd only mention them casually, of course,' Fricker continued with a passing smile. 'Well, if there's trouble, or serious apprehension of it, the Dramoffsky Concessions would be blown sky-high—because it's all English capital and labour, and for a long time anyhow the whole thing would be brought to a standstill, and the machinery all go to the deuce, and so on.'

Again Trix nodded wisely.

'Whereas, if everything's all right, the Concessions are pretty well all right too. Have you noticed that they've

been falling a good deal lately? No, I suppose not. Most papers don't quote them.'

'I haven't looked for them. I've had my eye on the Glowing Star.' Trix was anxious to give an impression of being business-like in one matter anyhow.

'Oh, that's good for a few hundreds, but don't you worry about it. I'll look after that for you. As I say, if there's serious apprehension, Dramoffskys go down. Well, there will be—more serious than there is now. And after that——'

'War?' asked Trix in some excitement.

'We imagine not. I'd say we know, only one never really knows anything. No, there will be a revival of confidence. And then Dramoffskys—well, you see what follows. Now it's a little risky—not very—and it's a big thing if it comes off, and what I'm telling you is worth a considerable sum as a marketable commodity. Are you inclined to come in?'

To Trix there could be but one answer. Coming in with Mr. Fricker had always meant coming out better for the process. She thanked him enthusiastically.

'All right. Lodge five thousand at your bankers' as soon as you can, and let me have it.'

'Five thousand!' Trix gasped a little. She had not done the thing on such a scale as this before.

'It's always seemed to me waste of time to fish for herrings with a rod and line,' observed Fricker; 'but just as you like, of course.'

'Does Beaufort think well of it?'

'Do you generally find us differing?' Fricker smiled ironically.

'I'll go in,' said Trix. 'I shall make a lot, sha'n't I?'

'I think so. Hold your tongue, and stay in till I tell you to come out. You can rely on me.'

Nothing more passed between them then. Trix was left to consider the plunge that she had made. Could it possibly go wrong? If it did—she reckoned up her position. If it

went wrong—if the five thousand or the bulk of it were lost, what was left to her? After payment of all liabilities, she would have about ten thousand pounds. That she had determined to keep intact. On the interest of that—at last the distinction was beginning to thrust itself on her mind with a new and odious sharpness—she would have to live. To live—not to have that flat, or those gowns, or that brougham, or this position; not to have anything that she wanted and loved, but just to live. *Pensions* again! It would come to going back to *pensions*.

No, would it? There was another resource. Trix, rather anxious, a little fretful and uneasy, was sanguine and resolute still. She wrote to Beaufort Chance, telling him what she had done, thanking him, bidding him thank Fricker, expressing the amplest gratitude to both gentlemen. Then she sat down and invited Mervyn to come and see her; he had not been for some days, and, busy as he was, Trix thought it was time to see him, and to blot out, for a season at least, all idea of Audrey Pollington. She reckoned that an interview with her, properly managed, would put Audrey and her ally out of action for some little while to come.

Mervyn obeyed her summons, but not in a very cheerful mood. Trix's efforts to pump him about the problems and the complications were signally unsuccessful. He snubbed her, giving her to understand that he was amazed at being asked such questions. What, then, was Beaufort Chance doing, she asked in her heart. She passed rapidly from the dangerous ground, declaring with a pout that she thought he might have told her some gossip, to equip her for her next dinner party. He responded to her lighter mood with hardly more cordiality. Evidently there was something wrong with him, something which prevented her spell from working on him as it was wont. Trix was dismayed. Was her power gone? It could not be that statuesque Miss Pollington had triumphed, or was even imminently dangerous.

At last Mervyn broke out with what he had to say. He looked, she thought, like a husband (not like Vesey Trevalla, but

like the abstract conception), and a rather imperious one, as he took his stand on her hearthrug and frowned down at her.

'You might know—no, you do know—the best people in London,' he said, 'and yet I hear of your going about with the Frickers! I should think Fricker's a rogue, and I know he's a cad. And the women!' Aristocratic scorn embittered his tongue.

'Whom have you heard it from?'

'Lots of people. Among others, Viola Blixworth.'

'Oh, Lady Blixworth! Of course you'd hear it from her!

'It doesn't matter who tells me, if it's true.'

That was an annoying line to take. It was easy to show Lady Blixworth's motive, but it was impossible to deny the accuracy of what she said. A hundred safe witnesses would have confounded Trix had she denied.

'What in the world do you do it for?' he asked angrily and impatiently. 'What can Fricker do for you? Don't you see how you lower yourself? They'll be saying he's bought you next!'

Trix did not start, but a spot of colour came on her cheeks; her eyes were hard and wary as they watched Mervyn covertly. He came towards her, and, with a sudden softening of manner, laid his hand on hers.

'Drop them,' he urged. 'Don't have anything more to do with such a lot.'

Trix looked up at him; there were doubt and distress in her eyes. He was affectionate now, but also very firm.

'For my sake, drop them,' he said. 'You know people can't come where they may meet the Frickers.'

Trix was never slow of understanding; she saw very well what Mervyn meant. His words might be smooth, his manner might be kind, and, if she wished it at the moment, ready to grow more than kind. With all this he was asking, nay, he was demanding, that she should drop the Frickers. How difficult the path had suddenly grown; how hard it was to work her complicated plan!

'A good many people know them. There's Mr. Chance——' she began timidly.

'Beaufort Chance! Yes, better if he didn't!' His lips, grimly closing again, were a strong condemnation of his colleague.

'They're kind people, really.'

'They're entirely beneath you—and beneath your friends.'

There was no mistaking the position. Mervyn was delivering an ultimatum. It was little use to say that he had no right because he had made her no offer. He had the power, which, it is to be feared, is generally more the question. And at what a moment the ultimatum came! Must Trix relinquish that golden dream of the Dramoffsky Concessions, and give up those hundreds—welcome if few—from the Glowing Star? Or was she to defy Mervyn and cast in her lot with the Frickers—and with Beaufort Chance?

'Promise me,' he said softly, with as near an approach to a lover's entreaty as his grave and condescending manner allowed. 'I never thought you'd make any difficulty. Do you really hesitate between doing what pleases me and what pleases Chance or the Frickers?'

Trix would have dearly liked to cry 'Yes, yes, yes!' Such a reply would, she considered, have been wholesome for Mortimer Mervyn, and it would have been most gratifying to herself. She dared not give it; it would mean far too much.

'I can't be actually rude,' she pleaded. 'I must do it gradually. But since you ask me, I will break with them as much and as soon as I can.'

'That's all I ask of you,' said Mervyn. He bent and kissed her hand with a reassuring air of homage and devotion. But evidently homage and devotion must be paid for. They bore a resemblance to financial assistance in that respect. Trix was becoming disagreeably conscious that people expected to be paid, in one way or another, for most things

that they gave. Chance and Fricker wanted payment. Mervyn claimed it too. And to pay both as they asked seemed now impossible.

Somehow life appeared to have an objection to being played with, the world to be rather unmalleable as material, the revenge not to be the simple and triumphant progress that it had looked.

Trix Trevalla, under pressure of circumstances, got thus far on the way towards a judgment of herself and a knowledge of the world; the two things are closely interdependent.

CHAPTER VI

CHILDREN OF SHADOW

'A POLITICIAN! I'd as soon be a policeman,' remarked Miles Childwick, with delicate scorn. 'I don't dispute the necessity of either—I never dispute the necessity of things—but it would not occur to me to become either.'

'You're not tall enough for a policeman, anyhow,' said Elfreda Flood.

'Not if it became necessary to take you in charge, I admit' (Elfreda used to be called 'queenly' and had played Hippolyta), 'but your remark is impertinent in every sense of the term. Politicians and policemen are essentially the same.'

Everybody looked at the clock. They were waiting for supper at the Magnifique; it was Tommy Trent's party, and the early comers sat in a group in the luxurious outer room.

'From what I know of policemen in the witness-box, I incline to agree,' said Manson Smith.

'The salaries, however, are different,' yawned Tommy, without removing his eyes from the clock.

'I'm most infernally hungry,' announced Arty Kane, a robust-looking youth, somewhat famous as a tragic poet. 'Myra Lacrimans' was perhaps his best-known work.

Mrs. John Maturin smiled; she was not great at repartee outside her writings. 'It is late,' she observed.

'But while policemen,' pursued Miles Childwick, sublimely careless of interruption, 'while policemen make things endurable by a decent neglect of their duties (or how do we

get home at night?), politicians are constantly raising the income tax. I speak with no personal bitterness, since to me it happens to be a small matter, but I observe a laceration of the feelings of my wealthy friends.'

'He'd go on all night, whether we listened or not,' said Horace Harnack, half in despair, half in admiration. 'I suppose it wouldn't do to have a song, Tommy?'

His suggestion met with no attention, for at the moment Tommy sprang to his feet, exclaiming, 'Here's Peggy at last!'

The big glass doors were swung open and Peggy came in. The five men advanced to meet her; Mrs. John Maturin smiled in a rather pitying way at Elfreda, but Elfreda took this rush quite as a matter of course and looked at the clock again.

'Is Airey here?' asked Peggy.

'Not yet,' replied Tommy. 'I hope he's coming, though.'

'He said something about being afraid he might be kept,' said Peggy; then she drew Tommy aside and whispered, 'Had to get his coat mended, you know.'

Tommy nodded cautiously.

'And she hasn't come either?' Peggy went on.

'No; and whoever she is, I hate her,' remarked Arty Kane. 'But who is she? We're all here.' He waved his arm round the assembly.

'Going to introduce you to society to-night, Arty,' his host promised. 'Mrs. Trevalla's coming.'

'Duchesses I know, and countesses I know,' said Childwick; 'but who——'

'Oh, nobody expected you to know,' interrupted Peggy. She came up to Elfreda and made a rapid scrutiny. 'New frock?'

Elfreda nodded with an assumption of indifference.

'How lucky!' said Peggy, who was evidently rather excited. 'You're always smart,' she assured Mrs. John Maturin.

Mrs. John smiled.

Timidly and with unfamiliar step Airey Newton entered the gorgeous apartment. Relief was dominant on his face when he saw the group of friends, and he made a hasty dart towards them, giving on the way a nervous glance at his shoes, which showed two or three spots of mud—the pavements were wet outside. He hastened to hide himself behind Elfreda Flood, and, thus sheltered, surveyed the scene.

'I was just saying, Airey, that politicians——'

Arty Kane stopped further progress by the hasty suggestion of a glass of sherry, and the two went off together to the side room, where supper was laid, leaving the rest again regarding the clock—except Peggy, who had put a half-crown in her glove, or her purse, or her pocket, and could not find it, and declared that she could not get home unless she did; she created no sympathy and (were such degrees possible) less surprise, when at last she distinctly recollected having left it on the piano.

'Whose half-crown on whose piano?' asked Manson Smith with a forensic frown.

When the sherry-bibbers returned with the surreptitious air usual in such cases, the group had undergone a marked change; it was clustered round a very brilliant person in a gown of resplendent blue, with a flash of jewels about her, a hint of perfume, a generally dazzling effect. Miles Childwick came up to Manson Smith.

'This,' said Childwick, 'we must presume to be Mrs. Trevalla. Let me be introduced, Manson, before my eyes are blinded by the blaze.'

'Is she a new flame of Tommy's?' asked Manson in a whisper.

The question showed great ignorance; but Manson was comparatively an outsider, and Miles Childwick let it pass with a scornful smile.

'What a pity we're not supping in the public room!' said Peggy.

'We might trot Mrs. Trevalla through first, in procession, you know,' suggested Tommy. 'It's awfully good of you to come. I hardly dared ask you,' he added to Trix.

'I was just as afraid, but Miss Ryle encouraged me. I met her two or three nights ago at Mrs. Bonfill's.'

They went in to supper. Trix was placed between Tommy and Airey Newton, Peggy was at the other end, supported by Childwick and Arty Kane. The rest disposed themselves, if not according to taste, yet with apparent harmony; there was, however, a momentary hesitation about sitting by Mrs. John. 'Mrs. John means just one glass more champagne than is good for one,' Childwick had once said, and the remark was felt to be just.

'No, politicians are essentially concerned with the things that perish,' resumed Miles Childwick; he addressed Peggy —Mrs. John was on his other side.

'Everything perishes,' observed Arty Kane, putting down his empty soup-cup with a refreshed and cheerful air.

'Do learn the use of language. I said "essentially concerned." Now we are essentially concerned with——'

Trix Trevalla heard the conversation in fragments. She did not observe that Peggy took much part in it, but every now and then she laughed in a rich gurgle, as though things and people in general were very amusing. Whenever she did this, all the young men looked at her and smiled, or themselves laughed too, and Peggy laughed more and, perhaps, blushed a little. Trix turned to Tommy and whispered, 'I like her.'

'Rather!' said Tommy. 'Here, waiter, bring some ice.'

Most of the conversation was far less formidable than Miles Childwick's. It was for the most part frank and very keen discussion of a number of things and persons entirely, or almost entirely, unfamiliar to Trix Trevalla. On the other hand, not one of the problems with which she, as a citizen and as a woman, had been so occupied was mentioned, and the people who filled her sky did not seem to have risen above the horizon here. Somebody did mention Russia once, and

Horace Harnack expressed a desire to have 'a slap' at that great nation; but politics were evidently an alien plant, and soon died out of the conversation. The last play or the last novel, the most recent success on the stage, the newest paradox of criticism, were the topics when gossip was ousted for a few moments from its habitual and evidently welcome sway. People's gossip, however, shows their tastes and habits better than anything else, and in this case Trix was not too dull to learn from it; it reproduced another atmosphere and told her that there was another world than hers. She turned suddenly to Airey Newton.

'We talk of living in London, but it's a most inadequate description. There must be ten Londons to live in!'

'Quite—without counting the slums.'

'We ought to say London A, or London B, or London C. Social districts, like the postal ones; only far more of them. I suppose some people can live in more than one?'

'Yes, a few; and a good many people pay visits.'

'Are you Bohemian?' she asked, indicating the company with a little movement of her hand.

'Look at them!' he answered. 'They are smart and spotless. I'm the only one who looks the part in the least. And, behold, I am frugal, temperate, a hard worker, and a scientific man!'

'There are believed to be Bohemians still in Kensington and Chelsea,' observed Tommy Trent. 'They will think anything you please, but they won't dine out without their husbands.'

'If that's the criterion, we can manage it nearer than Chelsea,' said Trix. 'This side of Park Lane, I think.'

'You've got to have the thinking too, though,' smiled Airey.

Miles Childwick had apparently been listening; he raised his voice a little and remarked: 'The divorce between the theoretical bases of immorality——'

'Falsely so called,' murmured Manson Smith.

'And its practical development is one of the most——'

It was no use; Peggy gurgled helplessly, and hid her face in her napkin. Childwick scowled for an instant, then leant back in his chair, smiling pathetically.

'She is the living negation of serious thought,' he complained, regarding her affectionately.

Peggy, emerging, darted him a glance as she returned to her chicken.

'When I published "Myra Lacrimans"——' began Arty Kane.

In an instant everybody was silent. They leant forward towards him with a grave and eager attention, signing to one another to keep still. Tommy whispered: 'Don't move for a moment, waiter!'

'Oh, confound you all!' exclaimed poor Arty Kane, as he joined in the general outburst of laughter.

Trix found herself swelling it light-heartedly.

'We've found by experience that that's the only way to stop him,' Tommy explained, as with a gesture he released the grinning waiter. 'He'll talk about "Myra" through any conversation, but absolute silence makes him shy. Peggy found it out. It's most valuable. Isn't it, Mrs. John?'

'Most valuable,' agreed Mrs. John. She had made no other contribution to the conversation for some time.

'All the same,' Childwick resumed, in a more conversational tone, but with unabated perseverance, 'what I was going to say is true. In nine cases out of ten the people who are——' He paused a moment.

'Irregular,' suggested Manson Smith.

'Thank you, Manson. The people who are irregular think they ought to be regular, and the people who are regular have established their right to be irregular. There's a reason for it, of course——'

'It seems rather more interesting without one,' remarked Elfreda Flood.

'No reason, I think?' asked Horace Harnack, gathering the suffrages of the table.

'Certainly not,' agreed the table as a whole.

'To give reasons is a slur on our intellects and a waste of our time,' pronounced Manson Smith.

'It's such a terribly long while since I heard anybody talk nonsense on purpose,' Trix said to Airey, with a sigh of enjoyment.

'They do it all the time; and, yes, it's rather refreshing.'

'Does Mr. Childwick mind?'

'Mind?' interposed Tommy. 'Gracious, no! He's playing the game too; he knows all about it. He won't let on that he does, of course, but he does all the same.'

'The reason is,' said Childwick, speaking with lightning speed, 'that the intellect merely disestablishes morality, while the emotions disregard it. Thank you for having heard me with such patience, ladies and gentlemen.' He finished his champagne with a triumphant air.

'You beat us that time,' said Peggy, with a smile of congratulation.

Elfreda Flood addressed Harnack, apparently resuming an interrupted conversation.

'If I wear green I look horrid, and if she wears blue she looks horrid, and if we don't wear either green or blue, the scene looks horrid. I'm sure I don't know what to do.'

'It'll end in your having to wear green,' prophesied Harnack.

'I suppose it will,' Elfreda moaned disconsolately. 'She always gets her way.'

'I happen to know he reviewed it,' declared Arty Kane with some warmth, 'because he spelt "dreamed" with a "t." He always does. And he'd dined with me only two nights before!'

'Where?' asked Manson Smith.

'At my own rooms.'

Then he certainly wrote it. I've dined with you there myself.'

Trix had fallen into silence, and Airey Newton seemed

content not to disturb her. The snatches of varied talk fell on her ears, each with its implication of a different interest and a different life, all foreign to her. The very frivolity, the sort of schoolboy and chaffy friendliness of everybody's tone, was new in her experience, when it was united, as here it seemed to be, with a liveliness of wits and a nimble play of thought. The effect, so far as she could sum it up, was of carelessness combined with interest, independence without indifference, an alertness of mind which laughter softened. These people, she thought, were all poor (she did not include Tommy Trent, who was more of her own world), they were none of them well known, they did not particularly care to be, they aspired to no great position. No doubt they had to fight for themselves sometimes—witness Elfreda and her battle of the colours—but they fought as little as they could, and laughed while they fought, if fight they must. But they all thought and felt; they had emotions and brains. She knew, looking at Mrs. John's delicate fine face, that she too had brains, though she did not talk.

'I don't say,' began Childwick once more, 'that when Mrs. John puts us in a book, as she does once a year, she fails to do justice to our conversation, but she lamentably neglects and misrepresents her own.'

Trix had been momentarily uneasy, but Mrs. John was smiling merrily.

'I miss her pregnant assents, her brief but weighty disagreements, the rich background of silence which she imparts to the entertainment.'

Yes, Mrs. John had brains too, and evidently Miles Childwick and the rest knew it.

'When Arty wrote a sonnet on Mrs. John,' remarked Manson Smith, 'he made it only twelve lines long. The outside world jeered, declaring that such a thing was unusual, if not ignorant. But we of the elect traced the spiritual significance.'

'Are you enjoying yourself, Airey?' called Peggy Byle.

He nodded to her cordially.

'What a comfort!' sighed Peggy. She looked round the table, laughed, and cried 'Hurrah!' for no obvious reason.

Trix whispered to Airey, 'She nearly makes me cry when she does that.'

'You can feel it?' he asked in a quick low question, looking at her curiously.

'Oh, yes, I don't know why,' she answered, glancing again at the girl whose mirth and exultation stirred her to so strange a mood.

Her eyes turned back to Airey Newton, and found a strong attraction in his face too. The strength and kindness of it, coming home to her with a keener realisation, were refined by the ever-present shadow of sorrow or self-discontent. This hint of melancholy persisted even while he took his share in the gaiety of the evening; he was cheerful, but he had not the exuberance of most of them; he was far from bubbling over in sheer joyousness like Peggy; he could not achieve even the unruffled and pain-proof placidity of Tommy Trent. Like herself then—in spite of a superficial remoteness from her, and an obviously nearer kinship with the company in life and circumstances—he was in spirit something of a stranger there. In the end he, like herself, must look on at the fun rather than share in it wholeheartedly. There was a background for her and him, rather dark and sombre; for the rest there seemed to be none; their joy blazed unshadowed. Whatever she had or had not attained in her attack on the world, however well her critical and doubtful fortunes might in the end turn out, she had not come near to reaching this; indeed it had never yet been set before her eyes as a thing within human reach. But how naturally it belonged to Peggy and her friends! There are children of the sunlight and children of the shadow. Was it possible to pass from one to the other, to change your origin and name? It seemed to her that, if she had not been born in the shadow, it had fallen on her full soon

and heavily, and had stayed very long. Had her life now, her new life with all its brilliance, quite driven it away? All the day it had been dark and heavy on her; not even now was it wholly banished.

When the party broke up—it was not an early hour—Peggy came over to Airey Newton. Trix did not understand the conversation.

'I got your letter, but I'm not coming,' she said. 'I told you I wouldn't come, and I won't.' She was very reproachful, and seemed to consider that she had been insulted somehow.

'Oh, I say now, Peggy!' urged Tommy Trent, looking very miserable.

'It's your fault, and you know it,' she told him severely.

'Well, everybody else is coming,' declared Tommy. Airey said nothing, but nodded assent in a manner half-rueful, half-triumphant.

'It's shameful,' Peggy persisted.

There was a moment's pause. Trix, feeling like an eavesdropper, looked the other way, but she could not avoid hearing.

'But I've had a windfall, Peggy,' said Airey Newton. 'On my honour, I have.'

'Yes, on my honour, he has,' urged Tommy earnestly. 'A good thumping one, isn't it, Airey?'

'One of my things has been a success, you know.'

'Oh, he hits 'em in the eye sometimes, Peggy.'

'Are you two men telling anything like the truth?'

'The absolute truth.'

'Bible truth!' declared Tommy Trent.

'Well, then, I'll come; but I don't think it makes what Tommy did any better.'

'Who cares, if you'll come?' asked Tommy.

Suddenly Airey stepped forward to Trix Trevalla. His manner was full of hesitation—he was, in fact, awkward; but then he was performing a most unusual function. Peggy and Tommy Trent stood watching him, now and then exchanging a word.

'He's going to ask her,' whispered Peggy.

'Hanged if he isn't!' Tommy whispered back.

'Then he must have had it!'

'I told you so,' replied Tommy in an extraordinarily triumphant, imperfectly lowered voice.

Yes, Airey Newton was asking Trix to join his dinner-party.

'It's—it's not much in my line,' he was heard explaining, 'but Trent's promised to look after everything for me. It's a small affair, of course, and—and just a small dinner.'

'Is it?' whispered Tommy with a wink, but Peggy did not hear this time.

'If you'd come——'

'Of course I will,' said Trix. 'Write and tell me the day, and I shall be delighted.' She did not see why he should hesitate quite so much, but a glance at Peggy and Tommy showed her that something very unusual had happened.

'It'll be the first dinner-party he's ever given,' whispered Peggy excitedly, and she added to Tommy, 'Are you going to order it, Tommy?'

'I've asked him to,' interposed Airey, still with an odd mixture of pride and apprehension.

Peggy looked at Tommy suspiciously.

'If you don't behave well about it, I shall get up and go away,' was her final remark.

Trix's brougham was at the door—she found it necessary now to hire one for night-work, her own horse and man finding enough to do in the daytime—and after a moment's hesitation she offered to drive Airey Newton home, declaring that she would enjoy so much of a digression from her way. He had been looking on rather vaguely while the others were dividing themselves into hansom-cab parties, and she received the impression that he meant, when everybody was paired, to walk off quietly by himself. Peggy overheard her invitation and said with a sort of relief:—

'That'll do splendidly, Airey.'

Airey agreed, but it seemed with more embarrassment than pleasure.

But Trix was pleased to prolong, even by so little, the atmosphere and associations of the evening, to be able to talk about it a little more, to question him while she questioned herself also indirectly. She put him through a catechism about the members of the party, delighted to elicit anything that confirmed her notion of their independence, their carelessness, and their comradeship. He answered what she asked, but in a rather absent melancholy fashion; a pall seemed to have fallen on his spirits again. She turned to him, attracted, not repelled, by his relapse into sadness.

'We're not equal to it, you and I,' she said with a laugh. 'We don't live there; we can only pay a visit, as you said.'

He nodded, leaning back against the well-padded cushions with an air of finding unwonted ease. He looked tired and worn.

'Why? We work too hard, I suppose. Yes, I work too, in my way.'

'It's not work exactly,' he said. 'They work too, you know.'

'What is it then?' She bent forward to look at his face, pale in the light of the small carriage lamp.

'It's the Devil,' he told her. Their eyes met in a long gaze. Trix smiled appealingly. She had to go back to her difficult life—to Mervyn, to the Chance and Fricker entanglement. She felt alone and afraid.

'The Devil, is it? Have I raised him?' she asked. 'Well, you taught me how. If I—if I come to grief, you must help me.'

'You don't know in the least the sort of man you're talking to,' he declared, almost roughly.

'I know you're a good friend.'

'I am not,' said Airey Newton.

Again their eyes met, their hearts were like to open and tell secrets that daylight hours would hold safely hidden.

But it is not far—save in the judgment of fashion—from the Magnifique to Danes Inn, and the horse moved at a good trot. They came to a stand before the gates.

'I don't take your word for that,' she declared, giving him her hand. 'I sha'n't believe it without a test,' she went on in a lighter tone. 'And at any rate I sha'n't fail at your dinner-party.'

'No, don't fail at my party—my only party.' His smile was very bitter, as he relinquished her hand and opened the door of the brougham. But she detained him a moment; she was still reluctant to lose him, to be left alone, to be driven back to her flat and to her life.

'We're nice people! We have a splendid evening, and we end it up in the depths of woe! At least—you're in them too, aren't you?' She glanced past him up the gloomy passage, and gave a little shudder. 'How could you be anything else, living here?' she cried in accents of pity.

'You don't live here, yet you don't seem much better,' he retorted. 'You are beautiful and beautifully turned out—gorgeous! And your brougham is most comfortable. Yet you don't seem much better.'

Trix was put on her defence; she awoke suddenly to the fact that she had been very near to a mood dangerously confidential.

'I've a few worries,' she laughed, 'but I have my pleasures too.'

'And I've my pleasures,' said Airey. 'And I suppose we both find them in the end the best. Good-night.'

Each had put out a hand towards the veil that was between them; to each had come an impulse to pluck it away. But courage failed, and it hung there still. Both went back to their pleasures. In the ears of both Peggy Ryle's whole-hearted laughter, her soft merry 'Hurrah!' that no obvious cause called forth, echoed with the mockery of an unattainable delight. You need clear soul-space for a laugh like that.

CHAPTER VII

A DANGEROUS GAME

THERE were whispers about Beaufort Chance, and nods and winks such as a man in his position had better have given no occasion for; men told one another things in confidence at the club; they were quite sure of them, but at the same time very anxious not to be vouched as authority. For there seemed no proof. The list of shareholders of the Dramoffsky Concessions did not display his name; it did display, as owners of blocks of shares, now larger, now smaller, a number of names unknown to fame, social or financial; even Fricker's interest was modest according to the list, and Beaufort Chance's seemed absolutely nothing. Yet still the whispers grew.

Beaufort knew it by the subtle sense that will tell men who depend on what people say of them what people are saying. He divined it with a politician's sensitiveness to opinion. He saw a touch of embarrassment where he was accustomed to meet frankness, he discerned constraint in quarters where everything had been cordiality. He perceived the riskiness of the game he played. He urged Fricker to secrecy and to speed; they must not be seen together so much, and the matter must be put through quickly; these were his two requirements. He was in something of a terror; his manner grew nervous and his face careworn. He knew that he could look for little mercy if he were discovered; he had outraged the code. But he held on his way. His own money was in the venture; if it were lost he was crippled in the race on which he had entered. Trix

Trevalla's money was in it too; he wanted Trix Trevalla and he wanted her rich. He was so hard-driven by anxiety that he no longer scrupled to put these things plainly to himself. His available capital had not sufficed for a big stroke; hers and his, if he could consider them as united, and if the big stroke succeeded, meant a decent fortune; it was a fine scheme to get her to make him rich while at the same time he earned her gratitude. He depended on Fricker to manage this; he was, by himself, rather a helpless man in such affairs. Mrs. Bonfill had never expected that he would rise to the top, even while she was helping him to rise as high as he could.

Fricker was not inclined to hurry himself, and he played with the plea for secrecy in a way that showed a consciousness of power over his associate. He had been in one or two scandals, and to be in another would have interfered with his plans—or at least with Mrs. Fricker's. Yet there is much difference between a man who does not want any more scandals and him who, for the sake of a great prize risking one, would be ruined if his venture miscarried. Fricker's shrewd equable face displayed none of the trouble which made Chance's heavy and careworn.

But there was hurry in Fricker's family, though not in Fricker. The season was half-gone, little progress had been made, effect from Trix Trevalla's patronage or favour was conspicuously lacking. Mrs. Fricker did not hesitate to impute double-dealing to Trix, to declare that she meant to give nothing and to take all she could. Fricker had a soul somewhat above these small matters, but he observed honour with his wife—for his oath's sake and a quiet life's. Moreover, be the affair what it would, suggest to him that he was being bested' in it, and he became dangerous.

A word is necessary about the position of Dramoffskys. They had collapsed badly on Lord Farringham's pessimistic speech. Presently they began to revive on the strength of 'inside buying'; yet their rise was slow and languid, the Stock Exchange was distrustful, the public would not come

in. There was a nice little profit ('Not a scoop at present,' observed Fricker) for those who had bought at the lowest figure, but more rumours would stop the rise and might send quotations tumbling again. It was all-important to know, or to be informed by somebody who did, just how long to hold on, just when to come out. Dramoffskys, in fine, needed a great deal of watching; the operator in them required the earliest, best, and most confidential information that he could get. Fricker was the operator. Beaufort Chance had his sphere. Trix, it will be noticed, was inclined to behave purely as a sleeping partner, which was all very well as regarded Dramoffskys themselves, but very far from well as it touched her relations towards her fellows in the game.

Trix was praying for speed and secrecy as urgently as Beaufort Chance himself; for secrecy from Mrs. Bonfill, from Mervyn, from all her eminent friends; for speed that the enterprise might be prosperously accomplished, the money made, and she be free again. No more ventures for her, if once she were free, she declared. If once she were—free! There she would pause and insist with herself that she had given Beaufort Chance no reason to expect more than the friendship which was all that he had openly claimed, nor the Frickers any right to look for greater countenance or aid than her own acquaintance and hospitality ensured them. Had she ever promised to marry Chance, or to take the Frickers to Mrs. Bonfill's or the Glentorly's? She defied them to prove any such thing—and looked forward with terror to telling them so.

At this point Mr. Liffey made entry on the scene with an article in 'The Sentinel.' Mr. Liffey had a terribly keen nose for misdeeds of all sorts and for secrets most inconvenient if disclosed. He was entirely merciless and inexhaustibly good-natured. He never abused anybody; he dealt with facts, leaving each person to judge those facts by his own moral standard. He had no moral standard of his own, or said so; but he had every idea of making 'The

Sentinel' a paying property. He came out now with an article whose heading seemed to harm nobody—since people with certain names must by now be hardened to having their patronymics employed in a representative capacity. 'Who are Brown, Jones, and Robinson?' was the title of the article in 'The Sentinel.' As the reader proceeded—and there were many readers—he found no more about these names, and gathered that Mr. Liffey employed them (with a touch of contempt, maybe) to indicate those gentlemen who, themselves unknown to fame, figured so largely in the share list of Dramoffskys. With a persistence worthy of some better end than that of making fellow-creatures uncomfortable, or of protecting a public that can hardly be said to deserve it, Mr. Liffey tracked these unoffending gentlemen to the honourable, though modest, suburban homes in which they dwelt, had the want of delicacy to disclose their avocations and the amount of their salaries, touched jestingly on the probable claims of their large families (he had their children by name!), and ended by observing, with an innocent surprise, that their holdings in Dramoffskys showed them to possess either resources of which his staff had not been able to inform him, or, on the other hand, a commercial enterprise which deserved higher remuneration than they appeared to be enjoying. He then suggested that present shareholders and intending investors in Dramoffskys might find the facts stated in his article of some interest, and avowed his intention of pursuing his researches into this apparent mystery. He ended by remarking, 'Of course, should it turn out that these gentlemen, against whom I have not a word to say, hold their shares in a fiduciary capacity, I have no more to say—no more about them, at least.' And he promised, with cheerful obligingness, to deal further with this point in his next number.

Within an hour of the appearance of this article Beaufort Chance entered Fricker's study in great perturbation. He found that gentleman calm and composed.

'How much does Liffey know?' asked Chance, almost trembling.

Fricker shrugged his shoulders. 'It doesn't much matter.'

'If he knows that I'm in it, that I've——'

'He won't know you're in it, unless one of the fellows gives us away. Clarkson knows about you, and Tyrrwhitt —none of the rest. I think I can keep them quiet. And we'll get out now. It's not as good as I hoped, but it's pretty good, and it's time to go.' He looked up at Chance and licked his cigar. 'Now's the moment to settle matters with the widow,' he went on. 'You go and tell her what I want and what you want. I don't trust her, and I want to see; and, Beaufort, don't tell her about Dramoffskys till you find out what she means. If she's playing square, all right. If not'—he smiled pensively—'she may find out for herself the best time for selling Dramoffskys—and Glowing Stars too.'

'Glowing Stars? She's not deep in them, is she? I know nothing about them.'

'A little private flutter—just between her and me,' Fricker assured him. 'Now there's no time to lose. Come back here and tell me what happens. Make her understand —no nonsense! No more shuffling! Be quick. I shall hold up the market a bit while our men get out, but I won't let you in for anything more.' Fricker's morals may have been somewhat to seek, but he was a fine study at critical moments.

'You don't think Liffey knows——?' stammered Chance again.

'About those little hints of yours? I hope not. But I know, Beaufort, my boy. Do as well as you can for me with the widow.'

Beaufort Chance scowled as he poured himself out a whisky-and-soda. But he was Fricker's man and he must obey. He went out, the spectre of Mr. Liffey seeming to walk with him and to tap him on the shoulder in a genial way.

At eleven o'clock Beaufort Chance arrived at Trix Trevalla's and sent up his name. Mrs. Trevalla sent down to say that she would be glad to see him at lunch. He returned word that his business was important, and would not bear delay. In ten minutes he found himself in her presence. She wore a loose morning-gown, her hair was carefully dressed, she looked very pretty; there was an air of excitement about her; fear and triumph seemed to struggle for ascendancy in her manner. She laid a letter down on the table by her as he entered. While they talked she kept putting her hand on it and withdrawing it again, pulling the letter towards her and pushing it away, fingering it continually, while she kept a watchful eye on her companion.

'What's the hurry about?' she asked, with a languor that was not very plausible. 'Dramoffskys?'

'Dramoffskys are all right,' said he deliberately, as he sat down opposite her. 'But I want a talk with you, Trix.'

'Did we settle that you were to call me Trix?'

'I think of you as that.'

'Well, but that's much less compromising—and just as complimentary.'

'Business! business!' he smiled, giving her appearance an approving glance. 'Fricker and I have been having a talk. We're not satisfied with you, partner.' He had for the time conquered his agitation, and was able to take a tone which he hoped would persuade her, without any need of threats or of disagreeable hints.

'Am I not most amiable to Mr. Fricker, and Mrs., and Miss?' Trix's face had clouded at the first mention of Fricker.

'You women are generally hopeless in business, but I expected better things from you. Now let's come to the point. What have you done for the Frickers?'

Reluctantly brought to the point, Trix recounted with all possible amplitude what she considered she had done. Her

hand was often on the letter as she spoke. At the end, with a quick glance at Beaufort, she said :—

'And really that's all I can do. They're too impossible, you know.'

He rose and stood on the hearthrug.

'That's all you can do?' he asked in a level smooth voice.

'Yes. Oh, a few more big squashes, perhaps. But it's nonsense talking of the Glentorlys or of any of Mrs. Bonfill's really nice evenings.'

'It's not nonsense. You could do it if you liked. You know Mrs. Bonfill, anyhow, would do it to please you; and I believe the Glentorlys would too.'

'Well, then, I don't like,' said Trix Trevalla.

He frowned heavily and seemed as if he were going to break out violently. But he waited a moment, and then spoke calmly again. The truth is that Fricker's interests were nothing to him. They might go, provided he could show that he had done his best for them; but doing his best must not involve sacrificing his own chances.

'So much for Fricker! I must say you've a cool way with you, Trix.'

'The way you speak annoys me very much sometimes,' remarked Trix reflectively.

'Why do you suppose he interested himself in your affairs?'

'I've done what I could.' Her lips shut obstinately. 'If I try to do more I sha'n't help the Frickers and I shall hurt myself.'

'That's candid, at all events.' He smiled a moment. 'Don't be in a hurry to say it to Fricker, though.'

'It'll be best to let the truth dawn on him gradually,' smiled Trix. 'Is that all you wanted to say? Because I'm not dressed, and I promised to be at the Glentorlys' at half-past twelve.'

'No, it's not all I've got to say.'

'Oh, well, be quick then.'

Her indifference was overdone, and Beaufort saw it. A

suspicion came into his mind. 'So much for Fricker!' he had said. Did she dare to think of meting out the same cavalier treatment to him?

'I wish you'd attend to me and let that letter alone,' he said in a sudden spasm of irritation.

'As soon as you begin, I'll attend,' retorted Trix; 'but you're not saying anything. You're only saying you're going to say something.' Her manner was annoying; perhaps she would have welcomed the diversion of a little quarrel.

But Beaufort was not to be turned aside; he was bent on business. Fricker, it seemed, was disposed of. He remained. But before he could formulate a beginning to this subject, Trix broke in:—

'I want to get out of these speculations as soon as I can,' she said. 'I don't mind about not making any more money as long as I don't lose any. I'm tired of—of the suspense, and—and so on. And, oh, I won't have anything more to do with the Frickers!'

He looked at her in quick distrust.

'Your views have undergone a considerable change,' he remarked. 'You don't want to speculate? You don't mind about not making any more money?'

Trix looked down and would not meet his eyes.

'Going to live on what you've got?' he asked mockingly. 'Or is it a case of cutting down expenses and retiring to the country?'

'I don't want to discuss my affairs. I've told you what I wish.'

He took a turn across the room and came back. His voice was still calm, but the effort was obvious.

'What's happened?' he asked.

'Nothing,' said Trix.

'That's not true.'

'Nothing that concerns you, I mean.'

'Am I to be treated like Fricker? Do you want to have nothing more to do with me?'

'Nonsense! I want us to be friends, of course.'

'You seem to think you can use men just as you please. As long as they're useful you'll be pleasant—you'll promise anything——'

'I never promised anything.'

'Oh, women don't promise only in words. You'll promise anything, hold out any hopes, let anything be understood! No promises, no! You don't like actual lying, perhaps, but you'll lie all the while in your actions and your looks.'

People not themselves impeccable sometimes enunciate moral truths and let them lose little in the telling. Trix sat flushed, miserable, and degraded as Beaufort Chance exhibited her ways to her.

'You hold them off, and draw them on, and twiddle them about your finger, and get all you can out of them, and make fools of them. Then—something happens! Something that doesn't concern them! And, for all you care, they may go to the devil! They may ruin themselves for you. What of that? I daresay I've ruined myself for you. What of that?'

Trix was certainly no more than partly responsible for any trouble in which Mr. Chance's dealings might land him; but we cannot attend to our own faults in the very hour of preaching to others. Chance seemed to himself a most ill-used man; he had no doubt that but for Trix Trevalla he would have followed an undeviatingly straight path in public and private morality.

'Well, what have you got to say?' he demanded roughly, almost brutally.

'I've nothing to say while you speak like that.'

'Didn't you lead me to suppose you liked me?'

'I did like you.'

'Stuff! You know what I mean. When I helped you—when I introduced Fricker to you—was that only friendship? You knew better. And at that time I was good enough for you. I'm not good enough for you now. So

I'm kicked out with Fricker! It's a precious dangerous game you play, Trix.'

'Don't call me Trix!'

'I might call you worse than that, and not do you any wrong.'

Among the temporal punishments of sin and folly there is perhaps none harder to bear than the necessity of accepting rebuke from unworthy lips, of feeling ourselves made inferior by our own acts to those towards whom we really (of this we are clear) stand in a position of natural superiority. Their fortuitous advantage is the most unpleasant result of our little slips. Trix realised the truth of these reflections as she listened to Beaufort Chance. Once again the scheme of life with which she had started in London seemed to have something very wrong with it.

'I—I'm sorry if I made you——' she began in a stammering way.

'Don't lie. It was deliberate from beginning to end,' he interrupted.

A silence followed. Trix fingered her letter. He stood there, motionless but threatening. She was in simple bodily fear; the order not to lie seemed the precursor of a blow—just as it used to be in early days when her mother's nerves were very bad; but then Mrs. Trevalla's blows had not been severe, and habit goes for something. This recrudescence of the tone of the old life—the oldest life of all—was horrible.

Of course Beaufort Chance struck no blow; it would have been ungentlemanly in the first place; in the second it was unnecessary; thirdly, useless. Among men of his class the distinction lies, not in doing or not doing such things, but in wanting or not wanting to do them. Beaufort Chance had the desire; his bearing conveyed it to Trix. But he spoke quietly enough the next minute.

'You'll find you can't go on in this fashion,' he said. 'I don't know what your plan is now, though perhaps I can guess. You mean to start afresh, eh? Not always so easy.' His look and voice were full of a candid contempt; he spoke

to her as a criminal might to his confederate who had 'rounded on' him in consideration of favours from the police.

He did not strike her, but in the end, suddenly and with a coarse laugh, he stooped down and wrenched the letter from her hand, not caring if he hurt her. She gave a little cry, but sat there without a movement save to chafe her wrenched fingers softly against the palm of the other hand. Beaufort Chance read the letter; it was very short: 'I knew you would do what I wish. Expect me to-morrow.—M.'

Trix wanted to feel horrified at his conduct—at its brutality, its licence, its absolute ignoring of all the canons of decent conduct. Look at him, as he stood there reading her letter, jeering at it in a rancorous scorn and a derision charged with hatred! She could not concentrate her indignation on her own wrong. Suddenly she saw his too—his and Fricker's. She was outraged; but the outrage persisted in having a flavour of deserved punishment. It was brutal; was it unjust? On that question she stuck fast as she looked up and saw him reading her letter. The next instant he tore it across and flung it into the grate behind him.

'You'll do as he wishes!' he sneered. 'He knows you will! Yes, he knows you're for sale, I suppose, just as I know it, and as Fricker knows it. He can bid higher, eh? Well, I hope he'll get delivery of the goods he buys. We haven't.'

He buttoned his frock-coat and looked round for his hat.

'Well, I've got a lot to do. I must go,' he said, with a curious unconscious return to the ordinary tone and manner of society. 'Good-bye!'

'Good-bye, Mr. Chance,' said Trix, stretching out her hand towards the bell.

'I'll let myself out,' he interposed hastily.

Trix rose slowly to her feet; she was rather pale and had some trouble to keep her lips from twitching. Speak she could not; her brain would do nothing but repeat his

words; it would not denounce him for them, nor impugn their truth; it would only repeat them. Whether they were just or not was a question that seemed to fall into the background; it was enough that anybody should be able to use them, and find her without a reply.

Yet when he was gone her feeling was one of great relief. The thing had been as bad as it could be, but it was done. It was over and finished. The worst had come—was known, measured, and endured. At that price she was free. She was degraded, bruised, beaten, but free. Chastened enough to perceive the truths with which Beaufort Chance had assailed her so unsparingly, she was not so changed in heart but that she still rejoiced to think that the object towards which she worked, in whose interest she had exposed herself to such a lashing, was still possible, really unprejudiced, in fact hers if she would have it. The letter was gone; but the promise of the letter lived.

Suddenly another thing occurred to her. What about Dramoffskys? What about her precious money? There she was, in the hands of these men whom she had flouted and enraged, so ignorant that she could do nothing for herself, absolutely at their mercy. What would they do? Would they wash their hands of her?

'Well, if they do—and I suppose they will—I must sell everything directly, even if I lose by it,' she thought. 'That's the only thing, and I sha'n't be quite ruined, I hope.'

Alas, how we misjudge our fellow-creatures! This trite reflection, always useful as a corrective either to cynicism or to enthusiasm, was to recur to Trix before the close of the day and to add one more to its already long list of emotions. Wash their hands of her? Concern themselves no more with her? That was not, it seemed, Mr. Fricker's intention anyhow. The evening post brought her a letter from him; she opened it with shrinking, fearing fresh denunciations, feeling herself little able to bear any more flagellation. Yet she opened it on the spot; she was unavoidably anxious about Dramoffskys.

Threats! Flagellation! Nothing of the sort. Fricker wrote in the friendliest mood; he was almost playful:—

'My dear Mrs. Trevalla,—I understand from our friend Beaufort Chance that he had an interview with you to-day. I have nothing to do with what concerns you and him only, and no desire to meddle. But as regards myself I fear that his friendly zeal may have given you rather a mistaken impression. I am grateful for your kindness, which is, I know, limited only by your ability to serve me, and I shall think it a privilege to look after your interests as long as you leave them in my charge. I gather from Chance that you are anxious to sell your Dramoffskys at the first favourable moment. I will bear this in mind. Let me, however, take the liberty of advising you to think twice before you part with your Glowing Stars. I hear good reports, and even a moderate rise would give you a very nice little profit on the small sum which you entrusted to me for investment in G. S.'s. Of course you must use your own judgment, and I can guarantee nothing; but you will not have found my advice often wrong. I may sell some of your Dramoffskys and put the proceeds in G. S.'s.

'I am, dear Mrs. Trevalla,

'With every good wish,

'Very faithfully yours,

SYDNEY FRICKER.'

There was nothing wherewith to meet this letter save a fit of remorse, a very kindly note to Mr. Fricker, and a regret that it was really impossible to do much for the Frickers. These emotions and actions duly occurred; and Trix Trevalla went to bed in a more tolerable frame of mind than had at one time seemed probable.

The gentleman unknown to fame sold Dramoffskys largely that day, and at last, in spite of Mr. Fricker, the price fell and fell. Fricker, however, professed himself sanguine. He bought a few more; then he sold a few for Trix Trevalla;

then he bought for her a few Glowing Stars, knowing that his friendly note would gain him a free hand in his dealings. But his smile had been rather mysterious as he booked his purchases, and also while he wrote the note; and——

'It's all right, my dear,' he said to Mrs. Fricker, in reply to certain observations which she made. 'Leave it to me, my dear, and wait a bit.'

He had not washed his hands of Trix Trevalla; and Beaufort Chance was ready to let him work his will. As a pure matter of business Mr. Fricker had found that it did not pay to be forgiving; naturally he had discarded the practice

CHAPTER VIII

USURPERS ON THE THRONE

AIREY NEWTON was dressing for dinner, for that party of his which Tommy Trent had brought about, and which was causing endless excitement in the small circle. He arrayed himself slowly and ruefully, choosing with care his least frayed shirt, glancing ever and again at a parcel of five-pound notes which lay on the table in front of him. There were more notes than the dinner would demand, however lavish in his orders Tommy might have been; Airey had determined to run no risks. He was trying hard to persuade himself that he was going to have a pleasant evening, and to enjoy dispensing to his friends a sumptuous hospitality. The task was a difficult one. He could not help thinking that those notes were not made to perish; they were created in order that they might live and breed; he hated to fritter them away. Yet he hated himself for hating it.

To this pass he had come gradually. First the money, which began to roll in as his work prospered and his reputation grew, had been precious as an evidence of success and a testimony of power. He really wanted it for nothing else; his tastes had always been simple, he had no expensive recreations; nobody (as he told Tommy Trent) had any claim on him; he was alone in the world (except for the rest of mankind, of course). He saved his money, and in that seemed to be doing the right and reasonable thing. When the change began or how it worked he could not now trace. Gradually his living had become more simple, and passed from simple to sparing; everything that threatened expense

was nipped in the bud. It began to be painful to spend money, sweet only to make it, to invest it, and to watch its doings. By an effort of will he forced himself to subscribe with decent liberality to a fair number of public institutions —his bankers paid the subscriptions for him. Nor did he fail if a direct appeal was made for an urgent case; then he would give, though not cheerfully. He could not be called a miser, but he had let money get altogether out of its proper place in life. It had become to him an end, and was no longer a means; even while he worked he thought of how much the work would bring. He thought more about money than about anything else in the world; and he could not endure to waste it. By wasting it he meant making his own and other people's lives pleasanter by the use of it.

Nobody knew, save Tommy Trent. People who did business with him might conjecture that Airey Newton must be doing pretty well; but such folk were not of his life, and what they guessed signified nothing. Of his few friends none suspected, least of all Peggy Ryle, who came and ate his bread-and-butter, believing that she was demanding and receiving from a poor comrade the utmost stretch of an unreserved hospitality. He suffered to see her mistake, yet not without consolation. There was a secret triumph; he felt and hated it. That had been his feeling when he asked Tommy Trent how he could continue to be his friend. He began to live in an alternation of delight and shame, of joy in having his money, of fear lest somebody should discover that he had it. Yet he did not hate Tommy Trent, who knew. He might well have hated Tommy in his heart. This again was peculiar in his own eyes, and perhaps in fact. And his friends loved him—not without cause either; he would have given them anything except what to another would have been easiest to give; he would give them even time, for that was only money still uncoined. Coin was the great usurper.

The dinner was a splendid affair. Airey had left all the ordering to Tommy Trent, and Tommy had been imperial. There were flowers without stint on the table; there were

bouquets and button-holes; there was a gorgeously emblazoned bill of fare; there were blocks of ice specially carved in fantastic forms; there were hand-painted cards with the names of the guests curiously wrought thereon. Airey furtively fingered his packet of bank-notes, but he could not help being rather pleased when Tommy patted him on the back and said that it all looked splendid. It did look splendid; Airey stroked his beard with a curious smile. He actually felt now as though he might enjoy himself.

The guests began to arrive punctually. Efforts in raiment had evidently been made. Mrs. John was in red, quite magnificent. Elfreda had a lace frock, on the subject of which she could not be reduced to silence. Miles Childwick wore a white waistcoat with pearl buttons, and tried to give the impression that wearing it was an ordinary occurrence. They were all doing their best to honour the occasion and the host. A pang shot through Airey Newton; he might have done this for them so often!

Trix came in splendour. She was very radiant, feeling sure that her troubles were at an end, and her sins forgiven in the popular and practical sense that she would suffer no more inconvenience from them. Had not Beaufort Chance raved his worst? and was not Fricker—well, at heart a gentleman? asked she with a smile. There was more. Triumph was impending; nay, it was won; it waited only to be declared. She smiled again to think that she was going to dine with these dear people on the eve of her greatness. How little they knew! In this moment it is to be feared that Trix was something of a snob. She made what amends she could by feeling also that she was glad to have an evening with them before her greatness settled on her.

Peggy was late; this was nothing unusual, but the delay seemed long to Tommy Trent, who awaited with apprehension her attitude towards the lavishness of the banquet. Would she walk out again? He glanced at Airey. Airey appeared commendably easy in his mind, and was talking to Trix Trevalla with reassuring animation.

'Here she comes!' cried Horace Harnack.

'She's got a new frock too,' murmured Elfreda, regarding her own complacently, and threatening to renew the subject on the least provocation.

Peggy had a new frock. And it was black—plain black, quite unrelieved. Now she never wore black, not because it was unbecoming, but just for a fad. A new black frock must surely portend something. Peggy's manner enforced that impression. She did indeed give one scandalised cry of 'Airey!' when she saw the preparations, but evidently her mind was seriously preoccupied; she said she had been detained by business.

'Frock hadn't come home, I suppose?' suggested Miles Childwick witheringly.

'It hadn't,' Peggy admitted, 'but I had most important letters to write, too.' She paused, and then added, 'I don't suppose I ought to be here at all, but I had to come to Airey's party. My uncle in Berlin is dead.'

She said this just as they sat down. It produced almost complete silence. Trix indeed, with the habits of society, murmured condolence, while she thought that Peggy might either have stayed away or have said nothing about the uncle. Nobody else spoke; they knew that Peggy had not seen the uncle for years, and could not be supposed to be suffering violent personal grief. But they knew also the significance of the uncle; he had been a real, though distant, power to them; the cheques had come from him. Now he had died.

Their glances suggested to one another that somebody might put a question—somebody who had tact, and could wrap it up in a decorous shape. Peggy herself offered no more information, but sat down by Tommy and began on her soup.

Conversation, reviving after the shock that Peggy had administered, presently broke out again. Under cover of it Peggy turned to Tommy and asked in a carefully subdued whisper: 'How much is a mark?'

'A mark?' repeated Tommy, who was tasting the champagne critically.

'Yes. German money, you know.'

'Oh, about a shilling.'

'A shilling?' Peggy pondered. 'I thought it was a franc?'

'No, more than that. About a shilling.'

Peggy gave a sudden little laugh, and her eyes danced gleefully.

'You mustn't look like that. It's not allowed,' said Tommy firmly.

'Then twenty thousand marks——?' whispered Peggy.

'Would be twenty thousand shillings—or twenty-five thousand francs—or in the depreciated condition of Italian silver some twenty-seven thousand lire. It would also be five thousand dollars, more cowrie shells than I can easily reckon, and, finally, it would amount to one thousand pounds sterling of this realm, or thereabouts.'

Peggy laughed again.

'I'm sorry your uncle's dead,' pursued Tommy gravely.

'Oh, so am I! He was always disagreeable, but he was kind too. I'm really sorry. Oh, but Tommy——'

The effort was thoroughly well-meant, but sorrow had not much of a chance. Peggy's sincerity was altogether too strong and natural. She was overwhelmed by the extraordinary effect of the uncle's death.

'He's left me twenty thousand marks,' she gasped out at last. 'Don't tell anybody—not yet.'

'Well done him!' said Tommy Trent. 'I knew he was a good sort—from those cheques, you know.'

'A thousand pounds!' mused Peggy Ryle. She looked down at her garment. 'So I got a frock for him, you see,' she explained. 'I wish this was my dinner,' she added. Apparently the dinner might have served as a mark of respect as well as the frock.

'Look here,' said Tommy. 'You've got to give me that money, you know.'

Peggy turned astonished and outraged eyes on him.

'I'll invest it for you, and get you forty or fifty pounds a year for it—regular—quarterly.'

'I'm going to spend it,' Peggy announced decisively. 'There are a thousand things I want to do with it. It is good of uncle!'

'No, no! You give it to me. You must learn to value money.'

'To value money! Why must I? None of us do.' She looked round the table. 'Certainly we've none of us got any.'

'It would be much better if they did value it,' said Tommy with a politico-economical air.

'You say that when you've made poor Airey give us this dinner!' she cried triumphantly.

With a wry smile Tommy Trent gave up the argument; he had no answer to that. Yet he was a little vexed. He was a normal man about money; his two greatest friends—Peggy and Airey Newton—were at the extreme in different directions. What did that signify? Well, after all, something. The attitude people hold towards money is, in one way and another, a curiously far-reaching thing, both in its expression of them and in its effect on others. Just as there was always an awkwardness between Tommy and Airey Newton because Airey would not spend as much as he ought, there was now a hint of tension, of disapproval on one side and of defiance on the other, because Peggy meant to spend all that she had. There is no safety even in having nothing; the problems you escape for yourself you raise for your friends.

Peggy, having sworn Tommy to secrecy, turned her head round, saw Arty Kane, could by no means resist the temptation, told him the news, and swore him to secrecy. He gave his word, and remarked across the table to Miles Childwick: 'Peggy's been left a thousand pounds.'

Then he turned to her, saying, 'I take it all on myself. It was really the shortest way, you know.'

Indescribable commotion followed. Everybody had a plan for spending the thousand pounds; each of them appropriated and spent it on the spot; all agreed that Peggy was the wrong person to have it, and that they were immensely glad that she had got it. Suggestions poured in on her. It may be doubted whether the deceased uncle had ever created so much excitement while he lived.

'I propose to do no work for weeks,' said Miles Childwick. 'I shall just come and dine.'

'I think of an *édition de luxe*,' murmured Arty Kane.

'I shall take nothing but leading business,' said Horace Harnack.

'We shall really have to make a great effort to avoid being maintained,' murmured Mrs. John, surprised into a remark that sounded almost as though it came from her books.

Trix Trevalla had listened to all the chatter with a renewal of her previous pleasure, enjoying it yet the more because, thanks to Fricker's gentlemanly conduct, to the worst of Beaufort Chance being over, and to her imminent triumph, her soul was at peace, and her attention not preoccupied. She, too, found herself rejoicing very heartily for Peggy's sake. She knew what pleasure Peggy would get, what a royal time lay before her.

'She'll spend it all. How will she feel when it's finished?'

The question came from Airey Newton, her neighbour. There was no touch of malice about it; it was put in a full-hearted sympathy.

'What a funny way to look at it!' exclaimed Trix, laughing.

'Funny! Why? You know she'll spend it. Oh, perhaps you don't; we do. And when it's gone——'

He shrugged his shoulders; her last state would be worse than her first, he meant to say.

Trix stopped laughing. She was touched; it was pathetic to see how the man who worked for a pittance felt a sort of

pain at the idea of squandering—an unselfish pain for the girl who would choose a brief ecstasy of extravagance when she might ensure a permanent increase of comfort. She could not herself feel like that about such a trifle as a thousand pounds (all in, she was wearing about a thousand pounds, and that not in full fig), but she saw how the case must appear to Airey Newton; the windfall that had tumbled into Peggy's lap meant years of hard work and of self-respecting economy to him.

'Yes, you're right,' she said. 'But she's too young for the lesson. And I—well, I'm afraid I'm incurable. You don't set us the best example either.' She smiled again as she indicated the luxurious table.

'A very occasional extravagance,' he remarked, seeing her misapprehension quite clearly, impelled to confirm it by his unresting fear of discovery, fingering the packet of five-pound notes in his pocket.

'I wish somebody could teach me to be prudent,' smiled Trix.

'Can one be taught to be different?' he asked, rather gloomily.

'Money doesn't really make one happy,' said Trix in the tone of a disillusionised millionaire.

'I suppose not,' he agreed, but with all the scepticism of a hopeless pauper.

They both acted their parts well; each successfully imposed on the other. But pretence on this one point did not hinder a genuine sympathy nor a reciprocal attraction between them. He seemed to her the haven that she might have loved, yet had always scorned; she was to him the type of that moving, many-coloured, gay life which his allegiance to his jealous god forbade him to follow or to know. And they were united again by a sense common to them, apart from the rest of the company—the sense of dissatisfaction; it was a subtle bond ever felt between them, and made them turn to one another with smiles half-scornful, half-envious, when the merriment rose high.

'I'm glad to meet you to-night,' she said, 'because I think I can tell you that your advice—your Paris advice—has been a success.'

'You seemed rather doubtful about that when we met last.'

'Yes, I was.' She laughed a little. 'Oh, I've had some troubles, but I think I'm in smooth water now.' She hardly repressed the ring of triumph in her voice.

'Ah, then you won't come again to Danes Inn!'

There was an unmistakable regret in his tone. Trix felt it echoed in her heart. She met his glance for a moment; the contact might have lasted longer, but he, less practised in such encounters, turned hastily away. Enough had passed to tell her that if she did not come she would be missed, enough to make her feel that in not going she would lose something which she had come to think of as pleasant in life. Was there always a price to be paid? Great or small, perhaps, but a price always?

'You should come sometimes where you can be seen,' she said lightly.

'A pretty figure I should cut!' was his good-humoured, rather despairing comment.

Trix was surprised by a feeling stronger than she could have anticipated; she desired to escape from it; it seemed as though Airey Newton and his friends were laying too forcible a hold on her. They had nothing to do with the life that was to be hers; they were utterly outside that, though they might help her to laugh away an evening or amuse her with their comments on human nature and its phases. To her his friends and he were essentially a distraction; they and he must be kept in the place appropriate to distractions.

At the other end of the table an elementary form of joke was achieving a great success. It lay in crediting Peggy with unmeasured wealth, in assigning her quarters in the most fashionable part of the town, in marrying her to the highest bigwig whose title occurred to any one of the

company. She was passed from Park Lane to Grosvenor Square and assigned every rank in the peerage. Schemes of benevolence were proposed to her, having for their object the endowment of literature and art.

'You will not continue the exercise of your profession, I presume?' asked Childwick, referring to Peggy's projected lessons in the art of painting and a promise to buy her works which she had wrung from a dealer notoriously devoted to her.

'She won't know us any more,' moaned Arty Kane.

'She'll glare at us from boxes—boxes paid for,' sighed Harnack.

'I shall never lose any more frocks,' said Elfreda with affected ruefulness.

Trix smiled at all this—a trifle sadly. What was attributed in burlesque to the newly enriched Peggy was really going to be almost true of herself. Well, she had never belonged to them; she had been a visitor always.

The most terrible suggestion came from Mrs. John—rather late, of course, and as if Mrs. John had taken some pains with it.

'She'll have her hair done quite differently.'

The idea produced pandemonium.

'What of my essay?' demanded Childwick.

'What of my poem?' cried Arty Kane.

Everybody agreed that a stand must be made here. A formal pledge was demanded from Peggy. When she gave it her health was drunk with acclamation.

A lull came with the arrival of coffee. Perhaps they were exhausted. At any rate when Miles Childwick began to talk they did not stop him at once as their custom was, but let him go on for a little while. He was a thin-faced man with a rather sharp nose, prematurely bald, and bowed about the shoulders. Trix Trevalla watched him with some interest.

'If there were such a thing as being poor and unsuccessful,' he remarked with something that was almost a wink in

his eye (Trix took it to deprecate interruption), 'it would probably be very unpleasant. Of course, however, it does not exist. The impression to the contrary is an instance of what I will call the Fallacy of Broad Views. We are always taking broad views of our neighbours' lives; then we call them names. Happily we very seldom need to take them of our own.' He paused, looked round the silent table, and observed gravely, 'This is very unusual.'

Only a laugh from Peggy, who would have laughed at anything, broke the stillness. He resumed :—

'You call a man poor, meaning thereby that he has little money by the year. Ladies and gentlemen, we do not feel in years, we are not hungry *per annum*. You call him unsuccessful because a number of years leave him much where he was in most things. It may well be a triumph!' He paused and asked, 'Shall I proceed?'

'If you have another and quite different idea,' said Arty Kane.

'Well, then, that Homogeneity of Fortune is undesirable among friends.'

'Trite and obvious,' said Manson Smith. 'It excludes the opportunity of lending fivers.'

'I shall talk no more,' said Childwick. 'If we all spoke plain English originality would become impossible.'

The end of the evening came earlier than usual. Peggy was going to a party or two. She had her hansom waiting to convey her. It had, it appeared, been waiting all through dinner. With her departure the rest melted away. Trix Trevalla, again reluctant to go, at last found herself alone with Airey Newton, Tommy having gone out to look for her carriage. The waiter brought the bill and laid it down beside Airey.

'Is it good luck or bad luck for Peggy?' she asked reflectively.

'For Peggy it is good luck; she has instincts that save her. But she'll be very poor again.' He came back to that idea persistently.

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'She'll marry somebody and be rich.' A sudden thought came and made her ask Airey, 'Would you marry for money?'

He thought long, taking no notice of the bill beside him. 'No,' he said at last, 'I shouldn't care about money I hadn't made.'

'A funny reason for the orthodox conclusion!' she laughed. 'What does it matter who made it as long as you have it?'

Airey shook his head in an obstinate way. Tommy Trent, just entering the doorway, saw him lay down three or four notes; he did not look at the bill. The waiter with a smile gave him back one, saying '*Pardon, monsieur!*' and pointing to the amount of the account. Tommy stood where he was, looking on still.

'Well, I must go,' said Trix, rising. 'You've given us a great deal of pleasure; I hope you've enjoyed it yourself!'

The waiter brought back the bill and the change. Airey scooped up the change carelessly, and gave back a sovereign. Tommy could not see the coin, but he saw the waiter's low and cordial bow. He was smiling broadly as he came up to Airey.

'Business done, old fellow? We must see Mrs. Trevalla into her carriage.'

'Good-bye to you both,' said Trix. 'Such an evening!' Her eyes were bright; she seemed rather moved. There was in Tommy's opinion nothing to account for any emotion, but Airey Newton was watching her with a puzzled air.

'And I shall remember that there's no such thing as being poor or unsuccessful,' she laughed. 'We must thank Mr. Childwick for that.'

'There's nothing of that sort for you anyhow, Mrs. Trevalla,' said Tommy. He offered his arm, but withdrew it again, smiling. 'I forgot the host's privileges,' he said.

He followed them downstairs, and saw Airey put Trix in her carriage.

'Good-bye,' she called wistfully, as she was driven away.

'Shall we stroll?' asked Tommy. The night was fine this time.

They walked along in silence for some little way. Then Airey said:—

'Thank you, Tommy.'

'It was no trouble,' said Tommy generously, 'and you did it really well.'

It was no use. Airey had struggled with the secret; he had determined not to tell anybody—not to think of it or to take account of it even within himself. But it would out.

'It's all right. I happened to get a little payment to-day—one that I'd quite given up hope of ever seeing.'

'How lucky, old chap!' Tommy was content to say.

It was evident that progress would be gradual. Airey was comforting himself with the idea that he had given his dinner without encroaching on his hoard.

Yet something had been done—more than Tommy knew of, more than he could fairly have taken credit for. When Airey reached Danes Inn he found it solitary, and he found it mean. His safe and his red book were not able to comfort him. No thought of change came to him; he was far from that. He did not even challenge his mode of life or quarrel with the motive that inspired it. The usurper was still on the throne in his heart, even as Trix's usurper sat still enthroned in hers. Airey got no farther than to be sorry that the motive and the mode of life necessitated certain things and excluded others. He was not so deeply affected but that he put these repinings from him with a strong hand. Yet they recurred obstinately, and pictures, long foreign to him, rose before his eyes. He had a vision of a great joy bought at an enormous price, purchased with a pang that he at once declared would be unendurable. But the vision was there, and seemed bright.

'What a comforting thing impossibility is sometimes!' His reflections took that form as he smoked his last pipe. If all things were possible, what struggles there would be! He could never be called upon to choose between the vision and

the pang. That would be spared him by the blessing of impossibility.

Rare as the act was, it could hardly be the giving of a dinner which had roused these new and strange thoughts in him. The vision borrowed form and colour from the commonest mother of visions—a woman's face.

Two or three days later Peggy Ryle brought him seven hundred pounds—because he had a safe. He said the money would be all right, and, when she had gone, stowed it away in the appointed receptacle.

'I keep my own there,' he had explained with an ironical smile, and had watched Peggy's carefully grave nod with an inward groan.

CHAPTER IX

BRUISES AND BALM

Gossip in clubs and whispers from more secret circles had a way of reaching Mrs. Bonfill's ears. In the days that followed Mr. Liffey's public inquiry as to who Brown, Jones, and Robinson might be, care sat on her broad brow, and she received several important visitors. She was much troubled; it was the first time that there had been any unpleasantness with regard to one of her *protégés*. She felt it a slur on herself, and at first there was a hostility in her manner when Lord Glentorly spoke to her solemnly and Constantine Blair came to see her in a great flutter. But she was open to reason, a woman who would listen; she listened to them. Glentorly said that only his regard for her made him anxious to manage things quietly; Blair insisted more on the desirability of preventing anything like a scandal in the interests of the Government. There were rumours of a question in the House; Mr. Liffey's next article might even now be going to press. As to the fact there was little doubt, though the details were rather obscure.

'We are willing to leave him a bridge to retreat by, but retreat he must,' said Glentorly in a metaphor appropriate to his office.

'You're the only person who can approach both Liffey and Chance himself," Constantine Blair represented to her.

'Does it mean his seat as well as his place?' she asked.

'If it's all kept quite quiet, we think nothing need be said about his seat,' Blair told her.

There had been a difference of opinion on that question, but the less stringent moralists—or the more compassionate men—had carried their point.

'But once there's a question, or an exposure by Liffey—piff!' Blair blew Beaufort Chance to the relentless winds of heaven and the popular press.

'How did he come to be so foolish?' asked Mrs. Bonfill in useless, regretful wondering.

'You'll see Liffey? Nobody else can do anything with him, of course.'

Mrs. Bonfill was an old friend of Liffey's; before she became motherly, when Liffey was a young man, and just establishing 'The Sentinel,' he had been an admirer of hers, and, in that blameless fashion about which Lady Blixworth was so flippant, she had reciprocated his liking; he was a pleasant, witty man, and they had always stretched out friendly hands across the gulf of political difference and social divergence. Liffey might do for Mrs. Bonfill what he would not for all the Estates of the Realm put together.

'I don't know how much you know or mean to say,' she began to Liffey, after cordial greetings.

'I know most of what there is to know, and I intend to say it all,' was his reply.

'How did you find out?'

'From Brown, a gentleman who lives at Clapham, and whose other name is Clarkson. Fricker's weak spot is that he's a screw; he never lets the subordinates stand in enough. So he gets given away. I pointed that out to him over the Swallow Islands business, but he won't learn from me.' Mr. Liffey spoke like an unappreciated philanthropist. The Swallow Islands affair had been what Fricker called a 'scoop'—a very big thing; but there had been some trouble afterwards.

'Say all you like about Fricker——'

'Oh, Fricker's really neither here nor there. The public are such asses that I can't seriously injure Fricker, though I can make an article out of him. But the other——'

'Don't mention any public men,' implored Mrs. Bonfill, as though she had the fair fame of the country much at heart.

'Any public men?' There was the hint of a sneer in Liffey's voice.

'I suppose we needn't mention names. He's not a big fish, of course, but still it would be unpleasant.'

'I'm not here to make things pleasant for Farringham and his friends.'

'I speak as one of your friends—and one of his.'

'This isn't quite fair, you know,' smiled Liffey. 'With the article in type, too!'

'We've all been in such a fidget about it.'

'I know!' he nodded. 'Glentorly like a hen under a cart, and Constantine fussing in and out like a cuckoo on a clock! Thank God, I'm not a politician!'

'You're only a censor,' she smiled with amiable irony. 'I'm making a personal matter of it,' she went on with the diplomatic candour that had often proved one of her best weapons.

'And the public interest? The purity of politics? Cæsar's wife?' Liffey, in his turn, allowed himself an ironical smile.

'He will resign his place—not his seat, but his place. Isn't that enough? It's the end of his chosen career.'

'Have you spoken to him?'

'No. But of course I can make him. What choice has he? Is it true there's to be a question? I heard that Alured Cummins meant to ask one.'

'Between ourselves, it's a point that I had hardly made up my mind on.'

'Ah, I knew you were behind it!'

'It would have been just simultaneous with my second article. Effective, eh?'

'Have you anything quite definite—besides the speculation, I mean?'

'Yes. One clear case of—well, of Fricker's knowing

something much too soon. I've got a copy of a letter our gentleman wrote. Clarkson gave it me. It's dated the 24th, and it's addressed to Fricker.'

'Good gracious! May I tell him that?'

'I proposed to tell him myself,' smiled Liffey, 'or to let Cummins break the news.'

'If he knows that, he must consent to go.' She glanced at Liffey. 'My credit's at stake too, you see.' It cost her something to say this.

'You went bail for him, did you?' Liffey was friendly, contemptuous, and even compassionate.

'I thought well of him, and said so to George Glentorly. I ask it as a friend.'

'As a friend you must have it. But make it clear. He resigns in three days—or article, letter, and Alured Cummins!'

'I'll make it clear—and thank you,' said Mrs. Bonfill. 'I know it's a sacrifice.'

'I'd have had no mercy on him,' laughed Liffey. 'As it is, I must vamp up something dull and innocuous to get myself out of my promise to the public.'

'I think he'll be punished enough.'

'Perhaps. But look how I suffer!'

'There are sinners left, enough and to spare.'

'So many of them have charming women for their friends.'

'Oh, you don't often yield!'

'No, not often, but—you were an early subscriber to "The Sentinel."'

It would be untrue to say that the sort of negotiation on which she was now engaged was altogether unpleasant to Mrs. Bonfill. Let her not be called a busybody; but she was a born intermediary. A gratifying sense of power mingled with the natural pain. She wired to Constantine Blair, 'All well if X. is reasonable,' and sent a line asking Beaufort Chance to call.

Chance had got out of Dramoffskys prosperously. His

profit was good, though not what it had been going to reach but for Liffey's article. Yet he was content; the article and the whispers had frightened him, but he hoped that he would now be safe. He meant to run no more risks, to walk no more so near the line, certainly never to cross it. A sinner who has reached this frame of mind generally persuades himself that he can and ought to escape punishment; else where is the virtue—or where, anyhow, the sweetness—that we find attributed to penitence? And surely he had been ill-used enough—thanks to Trix Trevalla!

In this mood he was all unprepared for the blow that his friend Mrs. Bonfill dealt him. He began defiantly. What Liffey threatened, what his colleagues suspected, he met by angry assertions of innocence, by insisting that a plain statement would put them all down, by indignation that she should believe such things of him, and make herself the mouthpiece of such accusations. In fine, he blustered, while she sat in sad silence, waiting to produce her last card. When she said, 'Mr. Fricker employed a man named Clarkson?' he came to a sudden stop in his striding about the room; his face turned red, he looked at her with a quick furtive air. 'Well, he's stolen a letter of yours.'

'What letter?' he burst out.

With pity Mrs. Bonfill saw how easily his cloak of unassailable innocence fell away from him.

She knew nothing of the letter save what Liffey had told her.

'It's to Mr. Fricker, and it's dated the 24th,' said she.

Was that enough? She watched his knitted brows; he was recalling the letter. He wasted no time in abusing the servant who had betrayed him; he had no preoccupation except to recollect that letter. Mrs. Bonfill drank her tea while he stood motionless in the middle of the room.

When he spoke again his voice sounded rather hollow and hoarse.

'Well, what do they want of me?' he asked.

Mrs. Bonfill knew that she saw before her a beaten man.

All pleasure had gone from her now; the scene was purely painful; she had liked and helped the man. But she had her message to deliver, even as it had come to her. He must resign in three days—or article, letter, and Alured Cummins! That was the alternative she had to put before him.

'You've too many irons in the fire, Beaufort,' said she with a shake of her head and a friendly smile. 'One thing clashes with another.'

He dropped into a chair, and sat looking before him moodily.

'There'll be plenty left. You'll have your seat still; and you'll be free to give all your time to business and make a career there.'

Still he said nothing. She forced herself to go on.

'It should be done at once. We all think so. Then it'll have an entirely voluntary look.'

Still he was mute.

'It must be done in three days, Beaufort,' she half-whispered, leaning across towards him. 'In three days, or—or no arrangement can be made.' She waited a moment, then added, 'Go and write it this afternoon. And send a little paragraph round—about pressure of private business, or something, you know. Then I should take a rest somewhere, if I were you.'

He was to vanish—from official life for ever, from the haunts of men till men had done talking about him. Mrs. Bonfill's delicacy of expression was not guilty of obscuring her meaning in the least. She knew that her terms were accepted when he took his hat and bade her farewell with a dreary heavy awkwardness. On his departure she heaved a sigh of complicated feelings: satisfaction that the thing was done, sorrow that it had to be, wonder at him, surprise at her own mistake about him. She had put him in his place; she had once thought him worthy of her dearest Trix Trevalla. These latter reflections tempered her pride in the achievements of her diplomacy, and moderated to a self-depreciatory tone the

reports which she proceeded to write to Mr. Liffey and to Constantine Blair.

Hard is the case of a man fallen into misfortune who can find nobody but himself to blame; small, it may be added, is his ingenuity. Beaufort Chance, while he wrote his bitter note, while he walked the streets suspicious of the glances and fearful of the whispers of those he met, had no difficulty in fixing on the real culprit, on her to whom his fall and all that had led to it were due. He lost sight of any fault of his own in a contemplation of the enormity of Trix Trevalla's. To cast her down would be sweet; it would still be an incentive to exalt himself if thereby he could make her feel more unhappy. If he still could grow rich and important although his chosen path was forbidden him, if she could become poor and despised, then he might cry quits. Behind this simple malevolence was a feeling hardly more estimable, though it derived its origin from better things; it was to him that he wanted her to come on her knees, begging his forgiveness, ready to be his slave and to take the crumbs he threw her.

These thoughts, no less than an instinctive desire to go somewhere where he would not be looked at askance, where he would still be a great man and still be admired, took him to the Frickers' later in the afternoon. A man scorned of his fellows is said to value the society of his dog; if Fricker would not have accepted the parallel, it might in Chance's mind be well applied to Fricker's daughter Connie. Lady Blixworth had once described this young lady unkindly; but improvements had been undertaken. She was much better dressed now, and her figure responded to treatment, as the doctors say. Nature had given her a fine poll of dark hair, and a pair of large black eyes, highly expressive, and never allowed to grow rusty for want of use. To her Beaufort was a great man; his manners smacked of the society which was her goal; the touch of vulgarity, from which good birth and refined breeding do not always save a man vulgar in soul, was either unperceived or, as is perhaps more likely, considered the hall-mark of 'smartness'; others

than Connie Fricker might perhaps be excused for some confusion on this point. Yet beneath her ways and her notions Connie had a brain.

Nobody except Miss Fricker was at home, Beaufort was told; but he said he would wait for Mrs. Fricker, and went into the drawing-room. The Frickers lived in a fine, solid, spacious house of respectable age. Its walls remained; they had gutted the interior and had it refurnished and rebedecked; the effect was that of a modern daub in a handsome frame. It is unkind, but hardly untrue, to say that Connie Fricker did not dispel this idea when she joined Beaufort Chance and said that some whisky-and-soda was coming; she led him into the smaller drawing-room where smoking was allowed; she said that she was so glad that mamma was out.

'I don't often get a chance of talking to you, Mr. Chance.'

Probably every man likes a reception conceived in this spirit; how fastidious he may be as to the outward and visible form which clothes the spirit depends partly on his nature, probably more on his mood; nobody is always particular, just as nobody is always wise. The dog is fond and uncritical—let us pat the faithful animal. Chance was much more responsive in his manner to Connie than he had ever been before; Connie mounted to heights of delight as she ministered whisky-and-soda. He let her frisk about him and lick his hand, and he conceived, by travelling through a series of contrasts, a high opinion of canine fidelity and admiration. Something he had read somewhere about the relative advantage of reigning in hell also came into his mind, and was dismissed again with a smile as he puffed and sipped.

'Seen anything of Mrs. Trevalla lately?' asked Connie Fricker.

'Not for a week or two,' he answered carelessly.

'Neither have we.' She added, after a pause, and with a laugh that did not sound very genuine, 'Mamma thinks she's dropping us.'

'Does Mrs. Trevalla count much one way or the other?' he asked.

But Connie had her wits about her, and saw no reason why she should pretend to be a fool.

'I know more about it than you think, Mr. Chance,' she assured him with a toss of her head, a glint of rather large white teeth, and a motion of her full but (as improved) not ungraceful figure.

'You do, by Jove, do you?' asked Beaufort, half in mockery, half in an admiration she suddenly wrung from him.

'Girls are supposed not to see anything, aren't they?'

'Oh, I dare say you see a thing or two, Miss Connie!'

His tone left nothing to be desired in her eyes; she did not know that he had not courted Trix Trevalla like that, that even his brutality towards her had lacked the easy contempt of his present manner. Why give people other than what they want, better than they desire? The frank approval of his look left Connie unreservedly pleased and not a little triumphant. He had been stand-offish before; well, mamma had never given her a 'show'—that was the word which her thoughts employed. When she got one, it was not in Connie to waste it. She leant her elbow on the mantel-piece, holding her cigarette in her hand, one foot on the fender. The figure suffered nothing from this pose.

'I don't know whether you've heard that I'm going to cut politics?—at least office, I mean. I shall stay in the House, for a bit anyhow.'

Connie did not hear the whispers of high circles; she received the news in unfeigned surprise.

'There's no money in it,' Beaufort pursued, knowing how to make her appreciate his decision. 'I want more time for business.'

'You'd better come in with papa,' she suggested half-jokingly.

'There are worse ideas than that,' he said approvingly.

'I don't know anything about money, except that I like

to have a lot.' Her strong, hearty laughter pealed out in the candid confession.

'I expect you do; lots of frocks, eh, and jewels, and so on?'

'You may as well do the thing as well as you can, mayn't you?'

Chance finished his tumbler, threw away his cigarette, got up, and stood by her on the hearthrug. She did not shrink from his approach, but maintained her ground with a jaunty impudence.

'And then you have plenty of fun?' he asked.

'Oh, of sorts,' admitted Connie Fricker. 'Mamma's a bit down on me; she thinks I ought to be so awfully proper. I don't know why. I'm sure the swells aren't.' Connie forgot that there are parallels to the case of the Emperor being above grammar.

'Well, you needn't tell her everything, need you?'

'There's no harm done by telling her—I take care of that; it's when she finds out!' laughed Connie.

'You can take care of that too, can't you?'

'Well, I try,' she declared, flashing her eyes full on him.

Beaufort Chance gave a laugh, bent swiftly, and kissed her.

'Take care you don't tell her that,' he said.

'Oh!' exclaimed Connie, darting away. She turned and looked squarely at him, flushed but smiling. 'Well, you've got——' she began. But the sentence never ended. She broke off with a wary, frightened 'Hush!' and a jerk of her hand towards the door.

Mrs. Fricker came sailing in, ample and exceedingly cordial, full of apologies, hoping that 'little Connie' had not bored the visitor. Beaufort assured her to the contrary, little Connie telegraphing her understanding of the humour of the situation over her mother's shoulders, and laying a finger on her lips. Certainly Connie, whatever she had been about to accuse him of, showed no resentment now; she was quite ready to enter into a conspiracy of silence.

In a different way, but hardly less effectually, Mrs. Fricker soothed Beaufort Chance's spirit. She too helped to restore him to a good conceit of himself; she too took the lower place; it was all very pleasant after the Bonfill interview and the hard terms that his colleagues and Liffey offered him. He responded liberally, half in a genuine if not exalted gratitude, half in the shrewd consciousness that a man cannot stand too well with the women of the family.

'And how's Mrs. Trevalla?' Evidently Trix occupied no small place in the thoughts of the household; evidently, also, Fricker had not thought it well to divulge the whole truth about her treachery.

'I haven't seen her lately,' he said again.

'They talk a lot about her and Lord Mervyn,' said Mrs. Fricker, not without a sharp glance at Beaufort.

He betrayed nothing. 'Gossip, I daresay, but who knows? Mrs. Trevalla's an ambitious woman.'

'I see nothing in her,' said Connie scornfully.

'Happily all tastes don't agree, Miss Fricker.'

Connie smiled in mysterious triumph.

Presently he was told that Fricker awaited him in the study, and he went down to join him. Fricker was not a hard man out of hours or towards his friends; he listened to Beaufort's story with sympathy and with a good deal of heartfelt abuse of what he called the 'damned hypocrisy' of Beaufort's colleagues and of Mrs. Bonfill. He did not accuse Mr. Liffey of this failing; he had enough breadth of mind to recognise that with Mr. Liffey it was all a matter of business.

'Well, you sha'n't come to any harm through me,' he promised. 'I'll take it on myself. My shoulders are broad. I've made ten thousand or so, and every time I do that Liffey's welcome to an article. I don't like it, you know, any more than I like the price of my champagne; but when I want a thing I pay for it.'

'I've paid devilish high and got very little. Curse that woman, Fricker!'

'Oh, we'll look after little Mrs. Trevalla. Will you leave her to me? Look, I've written her this letter.' He handed Beaufort Chance a copy of it, and explained how matters were to be managed. He laughed very much over his scheme. Beaufort gave it no more explicit welcome than a grim smile and an ugly look in his eyes; but they meant emphatic approval.

'That's particularly neat about Glowing Stars,' mused Fricker in great self-complacency. 'She doesn't know anything about the trifling liability! Oh, I gave her every means of knowing—sent her full details. She never read 'em, and told me she had! She's a thorough woman. Well, I shall let her get out of Dramoffskys rather badly, but not too hopelessly badly. Then she'll feel virtuous—but not quite so virtuous as to sell Glowing Stars. She'll think she can get even on them.'

'You really are the deuce, Fricker.'

'Business, my boy. Once let 'em think they can play with you, and it's all up. Besides, it'll please my womankind, when they hear what she's done, to see her taken down a peg.' He paused and grew serious. 'So you're out of work, eh? But you're an M.P. still. That's got some value, even nowadays.'

'I shouldn't mind a job—not this instant, though.'

'No, no! That would be a little indiscreet. But presently?'

They had some business talk and parted with the utmost cordiality.

'I'll let myself out,' said Beaufort. He took one of Fricker's excellent cigars, lit it, put on his hat, and strolled out.

As he walked through the hall he heard a cough from half-way up the stairs. Turning round, he saw Connie Fricker; her finger was on her lips; she pointed warily upwards towards the drawing-room door, showed her teeth in a knowing smile, and blew him a kiss. He took off his hat with one hand, while the other did double duty in

holding his cigar and returning the salute. She ran off with a stifled laugh.

Beaufort was smiling to himself as he walked down the street. The visit had made him feel better. Both sentimentally and from a material point of view it had been consoling. Let his colleagues be self-righteous, Liffey a scoundrel, Mrs. Bonfill a prudish woman who was growing old, still he was not done with yet. There were people who valued him. There were prospects which, if realised, might force others to revise their opinions of him. Trix Trevalla, for instance—he fairly chuckled at the thought of Glowing Stars. Then he remembered Mervyn, and his face grew black again. It will be seen that misfortune had not chastened him into an absolute righteousness.

As for the kiss that he had given Connie Fricker, he thought very little about it. He knew just how it had happened, how with that sort of girl that sort of thing did happen. The fine eyes, not shy, the challenging look, the suggestion of the jaunty attitude—they were quite enough. Nor did he suppose that Connie thought very much about the occurrence either. She was evidently pleased, liked the compliment, appreciated what she would call 'the lark,' and enjoyed not least the sense of hoodwinking Mrs. Fricker. Certainly he had done no harm with Connie; nor did he pretend that, so far as the thing went, he had not liked it well enough.

He was right about all the feelings that he assigned to Connie Fricker. But his analysis was not quite exhaustive. While all the lighter shades of emotion which he attributed to her were in fact hers, there was in her mind also an idea which showed the business blood in her. Connie was of opinion that, to any girl of good sense, having been kissed was an asset, and might be one of great value. This idea is not refined, but no more are many on which laws, customs, and human intercourse are based. It was then somewhat doubtful whether Connie would be content to let the matter rest and to rank his tribute merely as a pastime or a compliment.

CHAPTER X

CONCERNING A CERTAIN CHINA VASE

At this point Trix Trevalla's fortunes impose on us a timid advance into the highest regions, where she herself trod with an unaccustomed foot. Her reception was on the whole gratifying. The Barmouths could not indeed be entirely pleased when their only son proposed to make a match so far from brilliant; but after all the Trevallas were gentlefolk, and (a more important point) the Barmouths had such a reverence for Mervyn that he might have imitated the rashness of King Cophetua without encountering serious opposition. His parents felt that he ennobled what he touched, and were willing to consider Trix as ennobled accordingly. They were very exclusive people, excluding among other things, as it sometimes seemed, a good deal of what chanced to be entertaining and amusing. It does not, however, do to quarrel with anybody's ideal of life; it is simpler not to share it.

Roguish nature had created Lord Barmouth very short, stout, and remarkably unimposing; he made these disadvantages vanish by a manner of high dignity not surpassed even by his tall and majestic wife. They had a very big house in Kent, within easy reach of London, and gave Saturday-to-Monday parties, where you might meet the people you had met in London during the week. There was a large hall with marble pillars round it, excellently adapted for lying in state, rather chilly perhaps if it were considered as a family hearth; Lord Barmouth was fond of walking his guests up and down this hall, and telling them what was

going to happen to the country—at least, what would, if it were not for Mortimer.

'On the whole I'd sooner go to the dogs and not have Mortimer,' Lady Blixworth had declared after one of these promenades.

The Glentorlys, Lady Blixworth and Audrey Pollington, three or four men—Constantine Blair among them—Mrs. Bonfill, Trix herself, and Mervyn, all came down in a bunch on Saturday evening—a few days after Trix had promised to marry Mervyn, but before any formal announcement had been made. The talk ran much on Beaufort Chance: he was pitied and condemned; he was also congratulated on his resignation—that was the proper thing to do. When this was said, glances turned to Mrs. Bonfill. She was discreet, but did not discourage the tacit assumption that she had been somehow concerned, and somehow deserved credit.

'It is vital—vital—to make an example in such cases,' said Barmouth at dinner. He had a notion that the force of an idea was increased by reiterating the words which expressed it.

'We naturally feel great relief,' said Mervyn. (By 'We' he meant the Ministry.)

'It's straining a point to let him stay in the House,' declared Glentorly.

'The seat's shaky,' murmured Constantine Blair. Mervyn's eye accused him of saying the wrong thing.

Trix, from conscience or good-nature, began to feel sorry for Beaufort Chance.

'Resist the beginnings—the beginnings,' said Lord Barmouth. 'The habit of speculation is invading all classes.'

'Public men, at least, must make a stand,' Mervyn declared.

The corners of Lady Blixworth's mouth were drooping in despair. 'What I go through for that girl Audrey!' she was thinking, for she had refused a most pleasant little dinner-and-theatre party in town. She was not in a good temper

with Trix Trevalla, but all the same she shot her a glance of understanding and sympathy.

'Now persons like this Fricker are pests—pests,' pursued Barmouth.

'Oh, Mr. Fricker's really a very good-natured man,' protested Trix, who was on her host's left hand.

'You know him, Mrs. Trevalla?' Lord Barmouth did not conceal his surprise.

'Oh, yes!'

'Mrs. Trevalla knows him just slightly, father,' said Mervyn.

Lord Barmouth attained a frigid amiability as he said with a smile: 'Used to know him, perhaps you'll say now?'

'That's better, Trix, isn't it?' smiled Mrs. Bonfill.

Lady Blixworth's satirical smile met Trix across the table. Trix felt mean when she did no more than laugh weakly in response to Barmouth's imperious suggestion. She understood what Lady Blixworth meant.

'If we cut everybody who's disreputable,' observed that lady sweetly, 'we can all live in small houses and save up for the Death Duties.'

'You're joking, Viola!' Lady Barmouth complained; she was almost sure of it.

'For my part, if Mr. Fricker will put me on to a good thing—isn't that the phrase, Mortimer?—I shall be very grateful and ask him to dinner—no, lunch; he can come to that without Mrs. Fricker. Why, you used to stand up for them, Sarah!'

'Things are different now,' said Mrs. Bonfill, with a touch of severity.

'Mrs. Bonfill means that circumstances have changed—changed completely,' Lord Barmouth explained.

'I thought she must mean that,' murmured Lady Blixworth, gratefully.

'You can't touch pitch without being defiled—defiled,' remarked Lord Barmouth, with an unpleasantly direct look at Trix. Everybody nodded with a convinced air.

'That's right, Barmouth,' said Sir Stapleton Stapleton-Staines, a gentleman with a good estate in that part of the country. 'In my opinion that's right.'

That being settled, Lady Barmouth rose.

Next morning, after church (everybody went except Lady Blixworth, who had announced on going to bed that she would have a headache until lunch), Mervyn took Trix for a walk round the place. It was then, for the first time, her fright wearing off, that the truth of the position flashed on her in all its brilliance. She was no mere Saturday-to-Monday visitor; she had come to see what was to be her home; she was to be mistress of it all some day. Mervyn's words, and his manner still more, asserted this and reminded her of it every moment: the long stately façade of the house, the elaborate gardens, the stretches of immemorial turf, all the spacious luxury of the pleasure-grounds, every fountain, every statue, he pointed out, if not exactly for her approval, yet as if she had a right to an account of them, and was to be congratulated on their excellence. 'I have a great deal to give—look at it all. I give it all to you!' Some such words summarise roughly Mervyn's tone and demeanour. Trix grew eager and excited as the fumes of greatness mounted to her head; she hugged the anticipation of her splendour. What a victory it was! Think of the lodging-houses, the four years with Vesey Trevalla, the *pensions*, think even of the flat—the flat and the debts—and then look round on this! Was not this the revenge indeed?

And the price? She had learnt enough of the world now to be getting into the way of expecting a price. But it seemed very light here. She liked Mervyn, and not much more than that degree of feeling seemed to be expected of her. He was fond of kissing her hand in a rather formal fashion; when he kissed her cheek there was a hint of something that she decided to call avuncular. No display of passion was asked from her. All she had to do was to be a particularly good girl; in view of the manner of the whole family towards her, she could not resist that way of

putting it. So long as she was a good girl they would be very kind to her. 'But we can't have pranks—pranks,' she seemed to hear her future father-in-law declaring. Against pranks they would be very firm. Like speculation, like the Frickers, pranks might invade every class of society, but they would find no countenance from the house of Barmouth.

Well, pranks are a small part of life, after all. One may like to think of a few as possible, but they are surely of no great moment. Trix thoroughly understood the gently congratulatory manner which the company assumed towards her. Audrey Pollington was wistfully and almost openly envious; she sat between two fountains, looking at the house and announcing that she would ask no more than to sit there always. Mrs. Bonfill, who could never be in a big house without seeming to own it, showed Trix all over this one, and kissed her twice during the process. Lord Barmouth himself walked her round and round the hall after lunch, and told her a family reminiscence for each several pillar that they passed. Only in Lady Blixworth's eyes did Trix find an expression that might be malice, or, on the other hand, conceivably might be pity. A remark she made to Trix as they sat together in the garden favoured the latter view, although, of course, the position of affairs tended to support the former.

'I suppose you haven't had enough of it yet to feel anything of the kind,' she said, 'but, for my part, sometimes I feel as if I should like to get drunk, run out into the road in my petticoat, and scream!'

'I don't think Lord Barmouth would let you come back again,' laughed Trix.

'I suppose Sarah's trained you too well. Look at Sarah! It wasn't forced on her; she needn't have had it! She would have it, and she loves it.'

'There's a great deal to love in it,' said Trix, looking round her.

'Everything, my dear, except one single fandango! Now

I love a fandango. So I go about looking as if I'd never heard of one.' She turned to Trix. 'I shouldn't wonder if you loved a fandango too?'

'I haven't had many,' said Trix, it must be owned with regret.

'No, and you won't now,' remarked Lady Blixworth.

There was no use in keeping up the fiction of a secret.

'I shall have to be very good indeed,' smiled Trix.

'Oh, it's just splendid for you, of course!' The natural woman and the trained one were at issue in Lady Blixworth's heart. 'And I daresay one might love Mortimer. Don't be hurt—I'm only speculating.'

'He's everything that's good, and distinguished, and kind.'

Lady Blixworth looked round cautiously, smiled at Trix, and remarked with the utmost apparent irrelevance, 'Fol-de-rol!'

Then they both laughed.

'Hush! here comes Sarah! Don't look thoughtful, or she'll kiss you. Kisses are a remedy for thought sometimes, but not Sarah's.'

Trix did not regard the absence of pranks and fandangoes as an inseparable accident of high degree—there facts might have confuted her—but it certainly seemed the most striking characteristic of the particular exalted family to which she was to belong. The guests left on Monday; Trix remained for the week, alone with her prospective relations. Mervyn ran up to his office two or three times, but he was not wanted in the House, and was most of the time at Barslett, as the place was called. Everything was arranged; the engagement was to be announced immediately; Trix was in the house on the footing of a daughter. For some reason or another she was treated—she could not deny it—rather like a prodigal daughter; even her lover evidently thought that she had a good deal to learn and quite as much to forget. All the three were industrious people, all wanted her to understand their work, all performed it with an unconcealed sense of merit. Lord

Barmouth was a churchman and a farmer; Lady Barmouth was a politician and a housekeeper; Mervyn, besides going to be Prime Minister, was meditating a Life of Burke. 'One never need be idle in the country,' Barmouth used to say. To Trix's mind he went far to rob the country of its main attraction. She felt that she would have bartered a little splendour against a little more liveliness. Was this to repent of her bargain? No, in truth! She was always giving thanks that she had done so magnificently, got out of all her troubles, sailed prosperously into a haven so ample and so sure. Yet Lady Blixworth's untutored impulse recurred to her now and then, and met with a welcoming smile of sympathy. Airey Newton and Peggy Ryle came into her mind too, on occasion; their images were dismissed with a passing sigh.

What annoyed her most was that she found her courage failing. The high spirit that had defied Beaufort Chance, braved Fricker, and treated almost on equal terms with Mrs. Bonfill, seemed cowed by the portentous order, decorum, usefulness, industry, and piety that now encircled her in a ring-fence of virtue. Day by day she became more afraid of this august couple and their even more august son, her lover and chosen husband. She had said that she must be a good girl in fun at first, as a burlesque on their bearing towards her. Really truth threatened to overtake the burlesque and make it rather fall short of than exaggerate or caricature her feelings. She would never dare to rebel, to disregard, or to question. She would be good—and she would be good because she would be afraid to be anything else. Of course the world would know nothing of that—it would see only the splendour—but she would know it always. Under the fine robes there would be golden chains about her feet. If her ideal of life had demanded freedom besides everything else, it was like to share the fate of most ideals.

'Oh, if I had the courage to defy them! Perhaps I shall when I'm married!'

No, she feared that she never would—not thoroughly, nor

without a quaking heart at least. Not because they were particularly wise or clever, or even supernaturally good. Rather because they were so established, so buttressed by habit, so entrenched by the tradition of their state. Defiance would seem rebellion and sacrilege in one. Trix had no difficulty in imagining any one of the three ordering her to bed; and (oh, worst humiliation!) she knew that in such a case she would go, and go in frightened tears. Such an absurd state of mind as this was intolerably vexatious.

'When you were a boy, were you afraid of your father and mother?' she asked Mervyn once.

'Afraid!' He laughed. 'I never remember having the least difference with either of them.'

That was it; nobody ever would have any differences in that family.

'I'm rather afraid of them,' she confessed. When he smiled again she added, 'And of you too.'

'How silly!' he said gently. It was, however, tolerably plain that he was neither surprised nor displeased. He took the fear to which she owned as a natural tribute to the superiority of the family, a playful feminine way which she chose to express her admiration and respect. He kissed her affectionately—as if she had been very good. No doubt, if there were bed when necessary, there would, on suitable occasions, be sugar-plums too. To Trix Trevalla, erstwhile rebel, gaoler, wanderer, free-lance, the whole thing seemed curiously like a second childhood, very different from her first, and destined to continue through her life.

'It'll make a slave or a liar of me, I know,' she thought. But she thought also that, if she spoke to Lady Blixworth in that vein, she would be asked on what grounds she expected to escape the common lot. It would probably make her both a liar and a slave, Lady Blixworth would say with her languid smile; but then the compensations! Even Lady Blixworth's wild impulse was admittedly only occasional, whereas she had a standing reputation for refinement and elegance.

An example of what was going to happen all her life

occurred on the last day of her visit, the last day, too, before the world was to hail her as the future Lady Mervyn. She was sitting by Mervyn, reading a book while he wrote. The post came in, and there was a letter for her. While he attacked his pile, she began on her one. It was from Fricker. A quick glance assured her that Mervyn's attention was fully occupied.

Mr. Fricker's letter opened very cordially and ran to a considerable length. It was concerned with Dramoffskys, and told her that he had sold her holding, considering that step on the whole the wisest thing in her interest. Owing, however, to a great variety of unforeseen events—more rumours, new complications, further anxiety as to what the Tsar meant to do—he regretted to inform her that he had for once miscalculated the course of the market. Dramoffskys had fallen rather severely; he would not take the responsibility of saying whether or when they would be likely to rise to the price at which she had bought—much less go higher. They would be worse before they were better—long before—was the conclusion at which he arrived with regret. So that in fine, and omitting many expressions of sorrow, it came to this: out of her five thousand pounds he was in a position to hand back only a sum of 2,301*l.* 5*s.* 11*d.*, which amount he had had the pleasure of paying to her account at her bank. 'I will advise you subsequently as to Glowing Stars,' he ended, but Trix had no thoughts to spare for Glowing Stars.

The blow was very severe. She had counted on a big profit, she was faced with a heavy loss. She did not suspect Fricker's good faith, but was aghast at her own bad luck.

'How horrible!' she exclaimed aloud, letting the letter fall in her lap. Even for a moment more she forgot that she was sitting by Mervyn.

'What's the matter, dear?' he asked, turning round. 'No bad news in your letter, I hope?'

'No, nothing serious, nothing serious,' she stammered, making a hasty clutch at the two big type-written sheets of paper.

'Are you sure? Tell me about it. You must tell me all your troubles.' He stretched out his hand and pressed hers. She crumpled up the letter.

'It's nothing, really nothing, Mortimer.'

'Do you cry out "How horrible!" about nothing?' His smile was playful; such a course of conduct would be plainly unreasonable. 'Whom is it from?' he asked.

'It's from my servant, to tell me she's broken a china vase I'm very fond of,' said Trix in a smooth voice, quite fluently, her eyes fixed on Mervyn in innocent grief and consternation.

Fortunately he was not an observant man. He had noticed neither the typewriting nor Trix's initial confusion. He patted her hand, then drew it to him and kissed it, saying with a laugh:—

'I'm glad it's no worse. You looked so frightened.' Then he turned back to his letters.

Presently Trix escaped into the garden in a tempest of rage at herself. She was thinking no more of the treacherous conduct of Dramoffskys, but of herself.

'That's what I shall always do!' she exclaimed to the trim lawns and the sparkling fountains, to the stately façade that was some day to salute her as its mistress. 'How easily I did it, how naturally!' She came to a pause. 'I'll go in and tell him.' She took a step or two towards the house, but stopped again. 'No, I can't now.' She turned away, saying aloud, 'I daren't!'

The thought flashed into her mind that he would be very easy to deceive. It brought no comfort. And if he ever found out! She must end all connection with Fricker, anyhow. She could not have such an inevitable source of lies about her as that business meant.

'How easily I did it!' she reflected to herself again in a sort of horror.

Mervyn told the story at dinner, rallying Trix on her exaggerated consternation over the news. Lady Barmouth took up the cudgels for her, maintaining a housewife's view of the importance and preciousness of household possessions.

Lord Barmouth suggested that perhaps the vase was an heirloom, and asked Trix how she became possessed of it, what was it like, what ware, what colour, what size, and so forth. Thence they passed, under Lady Barmouth's guidance, to the character of the servant, to her previous record in the matter of breakages, comparing her incidentally in this and other respects with a succession of servants who had been at Barslett. Steadily and unfalteringly, really with great resource and dexterity, Trix equipped both servant and vase with elaborate histories and descriptions, and agreed with the suggestion that the vase might perhaps be mended, and that the servant must be at least seriously warned as to what would happen in the event of such a thing ever occurring again. The topic with its ramifications lasted pretty well through the meal, Trix imagining all the time every sort of unlikely catastrophe which might possibly result in her dressing-case falling into the hands of the family and Mr. Fricker's letter being discovered therein.

Well, there was nothing for it; she must be good. If she would not go on lying, she must obey. There was some of the old hardness about her eyes and her lips as she came to this conclusion. She was not, after all, accustomed to having everything just as she liked. That had been only a dream, inspired by Airey Newton's words at Paris; when put to the test of experience, it had not borne the strain. She was to belong to the Barmouths, to be admitted to that great family; she would pay her dues.

She was very sweet to Mervyn that evening; there was a new submission in her manner, a strong flavour of the dutiful wife. From afar Lord Barmouth marked it with complacency and called his wife's attention to it.

'Yes, and I liked her for thinking so much about her vase, poor child,' said Lady Barmouth.

'In my opinion she will be a success—a success,' said he. 'After all, we might have been sure that Mortimer would make a suitable choice.'

'Yes, and Sarah Bonfil thoroughly approves.'

Lord Barmouth's expression implied that Mrs. Bonfill's approval might be satisfactory, but could not be considered essential. In such matters the family was a sufficient law unto itself.

The next day Trix went up to town. At the station Mervyn gave her a copy of the 'Times' containing the announcement that a marriage had been arranged between them. His manner left nothing to be desired—by any reasonable person at least; and he promised to come and see her on his way to the House next day. Trix steamed off with the 'Times' in her hand, and the hum of congratulation already sounding in her expectant ears.

She lay back in the railway carriage, feeling tired but content—too tired, perhaps, to ask whence came her content. The hum of congratulation, of course, had something to do with it. Had escaping from Barslett something to do with it too? Lazily she gave up the problem, threw the 'Times' aside, and went to sleep.

When the train was nearing London, she awoke with a start. She had been having visions again; they had come while she slept—strange mixtures of the gay restaurant and of dingy Danes Inn; a room where Airey Newton smoked his pipe, where the only sound was of Peggy Ryle's heart-whole laughter; a dream of irresponsibility and freedom. She laughed at herself as she awoke, caught up the paper again, and re-read that important announcement. There lay reality; have done with figments! And what a magnificent reality it was! She stepped out on to the platform at Charing Cross with conscious dignity.

At the flat it rained telegrams; from everybody they came—from the Bonfills, the Glentorlys—yes, and the Farringhams; from crowds of less-known people. There was one from Viola Blixworth, and there was one from Peggy Ryle. She accorded this last the recognition of a little sigh. Then she went to dress for a dinner party. Her entry into the drawing-room that evening would be the first-fruits of her triumph. She thought no more about the china vase.

CHAPTER XI

THE MIXTURE AS BEFORE

For years a man may go on not perceiving nor understanding what he is doing with his life, failing to see not merely whither it is tending under his guidance, but even the various points at which from time to time it arrives. Miles Childwick had recommended a frame of mind affected with, or even devoted to, this blindness when he argued against the Fallacy of Broad Views; perhaps, like some other things that do not as a rule work well, it would work well enough if it could be maintained with absolute consistency. But a breakdown is hard to avoid. Something happens to the man, or, just as often, to another whom he knows and has watched as he has not watched his own doings; in the light of it he discerns hidden things about himself. He may find that he has given fame the go-by, or power, or the attainment of great place; he may groan over the discovery, or he may say *Vile damnum* and go back to his unobtrusive industry or his leisurely study. He may discover that he is not useful, and be struck with remorse, or, on the other hand, inspired to a sceptical defiance of the obligation; he may see that nobody is likely ever to think much of him or to care much about him, and smile at their rightness or their wrongness as his opinion leads him, and be annoyed or resigned as his temperament dictates. Or he may awake to a sense of some loss at once vaguer and larger than any of those hitherto suggested, a loss not of any particular thing, however desirable, out of life, but a loss of life itself; he has abdicated legitimate pretensions, drawn back

his boundaries, thrown away part of his inheritance, denied to his being some of the development to which it was inherently able to attain. A man who arrives at this conclusion must be of a very unusual temper if he does not suffer disquietude and discontent. It is easy to maintain that any given object of ambition, or even that any chosen excellence, is not indispensable; it needs more resolution to say that it is immaterial and no ground for regret that a man has been less of a man, a narrower creature, than it lay in his power to be; that he has stopped when he might have gone forward, and fallen into the habit of saying 'no' when he ought to have cultivated the practice of saying 'yes.' It is difficult for him to vindicate to himself his refusal of the fulness of life according as the measure of his ability would have realised it for him. It is nothing to say that he has had as much as, or more than, A, B, or C. He agrees scornfully. Has he taken as much as he himself could have claimed by the right of his nature and faculties? That seems the primeval obligation, Nature's great command, to be obeyed in ten thousand different ways, but always to be obeyed.

'Do you live?' Trix Trevalla had once asked Airey Newton. He had answered, 'Hardly.' Yet, when he said that, consciousness of the truth had been very dim and faint in him, just nascent perhaps, but unable to assert itself against things stronger in his soul. If it had grown from that time onward, the growth had been unmarked and almost imperceptible. He had his great delight, his preoccupation and propensity; that had still seemed enough. His renewed meeting with Trix, especially that talk of theirs after his dinner party, had forwarded matters another stage. The news of her engagement to Mervyn seemed the cue on which voices long silenced in him spoke aloud—not, indeed, in unreserved praise of Trix, a line permissible neither to his conception of the case nor to truth itself, but in an assertion that she was at least trying for what he had let slip, was reaching out her hands to the limit of life, was trying what the world could do for her. And, as he understood,

she dated this effort back to his advice. In the irony of that thought he found the concrete instance needed to give unity, force, and clearness to the vague murmurs of his spirit.

His mood bred no action; what stood between? First, a sense that he was too late; the feeling that Trix had awakened centred on her; she was to him part, an essential part, of the full life as it rose before his eyes; and, in fact, she was nothing to him. He would have liked to be content with that answer. But there was another; the red book and the safe still stood in the corner of his room. A divination of the true deity is but a small step towards robbing the old idol of his time-consecrated power. Airey Newton was left crying 'Impossible!' in answer to his own demand for the stir of life which Trix Trevalla embodied for him. Trix herself had wistfully given the same answer when Peggy Ryle made her long for the joy of it.

A week after the news which had such a peculiar significance for one man as well as its obvious social importance to many people, Peggy Ryle dropped in at Danes Inn and ate bread-and-butter in a complimentary sort of way. She also wanted another fifty pounds from her hoard, but she meant to lead up to this gently, as she had observed that Airey disapproved of her extravagance, and handed out her money to her with reluctance.

'Well, Airey, I suppose you haven't heard anything that's happening?' she said.

'Probably not,' he agreed with a grim smile. 'You're in the thick of it all?'

'For the present,' Peggy replied cautiously. 'I'm considered an heiress, and they ask me everywhere. Mrs. Bonfill has offered to take me out! I'm great, Airey. And I've gone to lots of places with Mrs. Trevalla.'

'She's great too?'

'Oh, yes, much greater. A new loaf to-day?'

'I thought you were about due. Want some more money?'

'How nice of you to suggest it!' cried Peggy in relieved gratitude. 'Just fifty, please—to pay for a frock, a supper, a box, and incidental expenses.'

'I think you'd better fit yourself up with a rich match, like Mrs. Trevalla. You'll be in the workhouse in three months.'

'I've been there before. Lots of friends always there, Airey!' Her nod and smile included him in the number with an affectionate recognition. 'And I don't know that Mrs. Trevalla is to be envied so particularly. I daresay it's very nice to be married in a cathedral, but it's not as inviting to be married to one—and it's what Lord Mervyn reminds me of.' She paused and then added, 'Trix isn't in love with him, of course.'

Undoubtedly Airey Newton was glad to hear that, though with no joy which can rank above a dog-in-the-manger's. However, he made no comment on it.

'And who's in love with you?' he asked.

'Two or three men, Airey,' replied Peggy composedly—'besides Miles, I mean.' Miles's affection was composed, but public. 'Miles renewed his offer on hearing that I had come into money. He said that the circumstance freed his action from any offensive appearance of benevolence.'

'And you said no?'

'I never say no to Miles. I never can do anything but laugh. It would be just perfect if he didn't mean it.' In spite of her sympathy Peggy laughed again. 'I wish you were rich and were going to marry Trix Trevalla,' she resumed. 'She's very fond of you, you know, Airey.'

'Stuff!' growled Airey unceremoniously.

'Well, of course!' sighed Peggy, glancing round the room.

A man may say 'Stuff!' and yet not be over-pleased to have it greeted with 'Of course!' Airey grumbled something into his pipe; Peggy smiled without hearing it.

'Well, I mean she'd never marry anybody who wasn't well-off,' she explained. 'She couldn't, you see; she's very

extravagant. I'm sure she spends more than she's got. But that doesn't matter now.'

'And perhaps you needn't be very severe on it,' Airey suggested.

'You gave an enormous dinner,' Peggy retorted triumphantly.

Airey began to walk about the room, giving an occasional and impatient tug at his beard.

'What's the matter?' asked Peggy, noting these signs of disturbance.

'Nothing,' said Airey, fretfully. 'You needn't talk as if I was a pauper,' he broke out the next moment.

'Here was something strange indeed. Never before had he resented any implied reference to his poverty; nay, he had rather seemed to welcome it; and in their little circle everybody took the thing as a matter of course. But Airey stood there looking resentful or at least ashamed, and greatly hurt anyhow. Peggy was terribly upset. She jumped up and ran to him, holding out her hands.

'How could I?' she cried. 'I had no idea—— Dear Airey, do forgive me! I never thought of hurting your feelings! How can you think that I or any of us mind a scrap whether you're rich or poor?' There were tears in her eyes, and she would not be refused a grasp of his hands. 'You thought I took it all—all you give me—and then sneered at you!' gasped Peggy.

'I'm comfortably off,' said Airey stiffly and obstinately.

'Yes, yes; of course you are. I'll never say anything of the sort again, Airey.' She let go his hands with a reluctant slowness; she missed the hearty forgiveness for which she had begged. He puzzled her now.

'I have money for everything I need. I don't pose as being poor.'

'Oh, you mustn't take it like that,' she groaned, feeling fit to cry in real earnest, conceiving him to be terribly wounded, sure now that he had squandered his resources on the dinner because among them they had made him ashamed

of being poor. She could not herself understand being ashamed of poverty, but she had an idea that many people were—especially men perhaps, to whom it properly belonged to labour, and to labour successfully.

'I sha'n't go until you forgive me,' she insisted. 'It'll spoil everything for me if you don't, Airey.'

'There's nothing to forgive,' he rejoined gloomily, as he dropped into a chair by the little table and rested his elbow on the red-leather book. 'I don't want to sail under false pretences, that's all.' His tones were measured and still hard. Peggy felt herself in disgrace; she drifted back to the window and forlornly poured out another cup of tea.

The impulse had been on Airey to tell her everything, to abandon to her his great secret, to let her know the truth as Tommy Trent knew it, to make her understand, by bitter mockery of himself, what that truth had done to him. But at the last he had not power to conquer the old habit of secrecy, or to face the change that a disclosure must bring. He unlocked his safe indeed, but it was only to take out five ten-pound notes; her money was all in notes, she liked the crackle of them. That done, he shut the door with a swing, clanking the heavy bolts home with a vicious twist of the handle.

'It sounds as if it meant to keep whatever it gets, doesn't it?' asked Peggy, with a laugh still rather nervous. She took the notes. 'Thanks, Airey. I love money.' She crackled the notes against her cheek.

Airey's laugh, almost hearty, certainly scornful, showed that he was recovering his temper. 'Your love displays itself in getting rid of the beloved object as quickly as possible,' he remarked.

'That's what it's for,' smiled Peggy, happy at the re-establishment of friendly relations.

Peggy paid two or three other visits that day. At Mrs. Bonfill's she found Glentorly and Constantine Blair. She was admitted, but nobody took much notice of her. They were deep in political talk: things were not going very well;

the country was not relying on Lord Glentorly in quite the proper spirit. Clouds were on everybody's brow. Peggy departed, and betook herself to Lady Blixworth's. The atmosphere here too was heavy and lamentable. Audrey seemed resentful and forlorn, her aunt acid and sharp; disappointment brooded over the premises.

'How people worry!' Peggy reflected, as she got back into her hansom and told the man to drive to Trix Trevalla's; if not at Danes Inn, if not in the houses of the great, there at least in Trix's flat she ought to find gaiety and triumph. The fact that people worried was oppressing Peggy to-day. Alas, Trix Trevalla was with Lord Mervyn! Gathering this fact from a discreet servant, Peggy fled back into her hansom with the sense of having escaped a great peril. She had met Lord Mervyn at Mrs. Bonfill's.

Whither now? Why, to Tommy Trent's, of course. The hansom (which was piling up a very good fare) whisked her off to Tommy's chambers at the corner of a street looking over St. James's Square. She left the cab at the door and went in. Here, anyhow, she was in great hopes of escaping the atmosphere of worry.

Tommy was a prosperous man, enjoying a very good practice as a solicitor in the City; his business was of a high class and yet decidedly lucrative. Peggy liked his rooms with their quiet luxury and their hint of artistic taste carefully unemphasised. She threw herself into a large armchair and waited for Tommy to appear. There was a small room where he sometimes worked an hour or so after he came home in the evenings, and there she supposed him to be; it was shut off by an interior door from the room where she sat, and opened on the passage by another which she had passed on her way in. The servant had told her that Mr. Trent was engaged for the moment, but would soon be free. Peggy hoped that it would turn out that he was free for the evening too; a little dinner would be restful, and she had no engagement that she considered it necessary to keep.

There was a murmur of voices through the door. Peggy

recognised Tommy's; it sounded familiar and soothing as she read a paper to while away the time; the other voice was strange to her. Presently there was the noise of chairs being pushed back, as though the interview were coming to a close. Tommy spoke again in a louder voice.

'Mr. Newton doesn't want his name mentioned.'

'We should have liked the support of Mr. Airey Newton's name.'

'He won't hear of that, but he believes in his process thoroughly——'

'I wonder if I ought to be hearing this!' thought Peggy, amused and rather interested at stumbling on her friends, so to speak, in their business hours and their business affairs.

Tommy Trent's voice went on:—

'And will take a fifth share in the syndicate—5,000*l.*'

'Is he prepared to put that down immediately?' The question sounded sceptical.

'Oh, yes, twice as much; to-morrow, if necessary. But no mention of his name, please. That's all settled then? Well, good-bye, Mr. Ferguson. Glad the thing looks so good. Hope your wife's well. Good-bye.'

The passage door was opened and shut. Peggy heard Tommy come back from it, whistling in a soft and contented manner. The passage door opened again, and the servant's voice was audible.

'Miss Ryle there? I'll go in directly,' said Tommy.

The paper had fallen from Peggy's hands. Five thousand pounds! Twice as much to-morrow, if necessary! Airey Newton! No other Newton, but Airey, Airey! The stranger had actually said 'Airey!' Her thoughts flew back to her talk with Airey—and, further back, to how Tommy Trent had made him give a dinner. And on that account she had quarrelled with Tommy! Everything fitted in now. The puzzle which had bewildered her in Danes Inn that very afternoon was solved. Perceiving the solution with merciless clearness, Peggy Ryle felt that she must cry. It was such hypocrisy, such meanness, nay, such

treachery. 'I don't want to sail under false colours,' he had said, and used that seemingly honest speech and others like it to make his wretched secret more secure. Now the safe took its true place in the picture; a pretty bad place it was; she doubted not that the red book was in the unholy business too. And the bread-and-butter! Peggy must be pardoned her bitterness of spirit. To think of the unstinted gratitude, the tender sentiment, which she had lavished on that bread-and-butter! She had thought of it as of St. Martin's cloak or any other classical case of self-sacrificing charity. And—worse, if possible—she had eaten the dinner too, a dinner that came from a grudging hand. She had fled to Tommy Trent's to escape worry. Worse than worry was here. With rather more justification than young folks always possess, she felt herself in the presence of a tragedy; that there was any comedy about also was more likely to strike a looker-on from outside.

'Sorry to have kept you waiting, Peggy,' said Tommy cheerfully, coming in from the other room. 'I had a man on business, and Wilson didn't tell me you were here.'

Peggy rose to her feet; a tear trickled down her cheek.

'Hullo! What's the matter? Are you in trouble?'

'I overheard you through the door.'

'What?'

'Just at the end you raised your voice.'

'And you listened?' Tommy was rather reproachful, but it did not yet seem to strike him what had happened.

'I heard what you said about Airey Newton.'

Tommy gave a low whistle; a look of perplexity, not unmixed with amusement, spread over his face.

'The deuce you did!' he remarked slowly.

'That's what's the matter: that's why I'm nearly crying.'

'I don't see it in that light, but I'm sorry you heard. It's a secret that Airey——'

'A secret! Yes, I should think it was. Are you anything

that I don't know of? I mean a burglar, or a swindler, or anything of that kind?'

'You do know that I'm a solicitor?' Tommy wanted to relieve the strain of the conversation.

'I meant to stay with you, and perhaps to take you out to dinner——'

'Well, why won't you? I haven't done anything—except forget that it's not wise to talk too loudly about my clients' business.'

'I'm just going to Danes Inn to see Airey Newton.'

'Oh!' Tommy nodded gravely. 'You think of doing that?'

'It's what I'm going to do directly. I've a hansom at the door.'

'I'm sure you've a hansom at the door,' agreed Tommy. 'Sit down one minute, please,' he added. 'I want you to do something for me.'

'Be quick, then,' commanded Peggy, sitting down, but obviously under protest. 'And you have done something too,' she went on. 'You've connived at it. You've backed him up. You've helped to deceive us all. You've listened to me while I praised him. You've praised him yourself.'

'I told you he could afford to give the dinner.'

'Yes—as he told me to-day that he wasn't a pauper! He made me think I'd hurt his feelings. I felt wretched. I begged him to forgive me. Oh, but it's not that! Tommy, it's the wretched meanness of it all! He was just one of the six or seven people in the world; and now——!'

Tommy was smoking, and had fallen into meditative silence.

He did not lack understanding of her feelings—anything she felt was always vivid to him—and on his own account he was no stranger to the thoughts that Airey Newton's propensity bred.

'How much money has he got?' she asked abruptly.

'I mustn't tell you.'

'More than what you said to that man?'

'Yes, more.'

'A lot more?'

Tommy spread out his hands and shrugged his shoulders. She knew all that mattered; it was merely etiquette that forbade an exact statement of figures; the essential harm was done.

'Well, you said you wanted something of me, Tommy.'

'I do. I want your word of honour that you'll never let Airey Newton know that you've found out anything about this.' He put his cigarette back into his mouth and smiled amicably at Peggy.

'I'm going straight to him to tell him I know it all. After that I sha'n't go any more.'

'Peggy, he's very fond of you. He'll hate your knowing, more than anybody else's in the world almost.'

'I shall tell him you're not to blame, of course.'

'I wasn't thinking of that. He's been very kind to you. There was always bread-and-butter!'

This particular appeal miscarried; a subtlety of resentment centred on the bread-and-butter.

'I hate to think of it,' said Peggy brusquely. 'Do you really mean I'm to say nothing?'

'I mean much more. You're still to be his friend, still to go and see him, still to eat bread-and-butter. And, Peggy, you're still to love him—to love him as I do.'

Peggy looked across at him, and looked with new eyes. He had been the dear friend of many sunny hours; but now he wore a look and spoke in tones that the sunny hours had not called forth.

'I stand by him, whatever happens, and I want you to stand by him too.'

'If it came to the point, you'd stand by him and let me go?' she asked with a sudden quick understanding of his meaning.

'Yes,' said Tommy simply. He did not tell her there would be any sacrifice in what she suggested.

'I don't believe I can do it,' moaned Peggy.

'Yes, you can. Be just the same to him, only—only rather nicer, you know. There's only one chance for him, you see.'

'Is there any chance?' she asked dolefully. Her eyes met his. 'Yes, perhaps I know what you mean,' said she.

They were silent a moment. Then he came over to her and took her hand. 'Word of honour, Peggy,' he said, 'to let neither Airey himself nor any of the rest know? You must connive, as I did.'

She turned her eyes up to his in their clouded brightness. 'I promise, word of honour, Tommy,' said she.

He nodded in a friendly way and strolled off to the writing-table. She wandered to the window and looked out on the spacious, solid old square. The summer evening was bright and clear, but Peggy was sad that there were things in the world hard to endure. Yet there were other things too; down in her heart was a deep joy because to-day, although she had lost a dear illusion, she had found a new treasure-house.

'I'm thinking some things about you, Tommy, you know,' she said without turning round. There was a little catch in her voice.

'That's all right. Just let me write a letter, and we'll go and dine.'

She stood still till he rose and turned to see her head outlined against the window. For a moment he regarded it in silence, thinking of the grace she carried with her, how she seemed unable to live with meanness, and how for love's sake she would face it now, and, if it might be, heal it by being one of those who loved. He came softly behind her, but she turned to meet him.

'I suppose we must all cry sometimes, Tommy. Do say it makes the joy better!'

'They always tell you that!' He laughed gently.

'I came here to laugh with you, but now——'

'Laughter's the second course to-day,' said Tommy Trent.

It came then. He saw it suddenly born in her eyes and marked its assault on the lines of her lips. She struggled conscientiously, thinking, no doubt, that it was a shame to laugh. Tommy waited eagerly for the victory of mirth, or even that it might, in a general rout, save its guns and ammunition, and be ready to come into action another day. He had his hope. Peggy's low rich laugh came, against her will, but not to be denied.

'At any rate I show him the better way! I drew another fifty pounds to-day. And he hates it—oh, he hates it, Tommy!'

He laughed too, saying, 'Let's go out and play.'

As they went downstairs she thrust her hand through his arm and kept patting him gently. Then she looked up, and swiftly down again, and laughed a little and patted him again.

'I've half a mind to sing,' said she.

The afternoon had been a bottle of the old mixture—laughter and tears.

CHAPTER XII

HOT HEADS AND COOL

THERE being in London (as Trix had once observed) many cities, if they persecute you in one you can flee unto another, with the reasonable certainty of finding an equally good dinner, company perhaps on the whole not less entertaining, and a welcome warmer for the novelty of seeing you. With these consolations a philosophic fugitive should be content.

But Beaufort Chance had not learnt this lesson, and did not take to the study of it cheerfully. He was indeed not cut by his old friends—things had not been quite definite enough for that—but he was gradually left out of a good many affairs to which he had been accustomed to be a party, and he was conscious that, where he was still bidden, it was from good-nature or the dislike of making a fuss, not from any great desire for his company. He was indifferently consoled by the proffered embraces of that other city which may be said to have had its centre in Mrs. Fricker's spacious mansion. The Frickers had an insight into his feelings, and the women at least made every effort to win his regard as well as to secure his presence. Fricker let matters go their own way; he was a man wise in observing the trend of events. He found it enough to put Chance into one or two business ventures against which there was nothing much to be said; he did not want to damage Chance's reputation any more, since his value would be diminished thereby.

The man knew that he had sunk and was sinking still. The riches for which he had risked and lost so much might still be his, probably more easily than at any previous time.

Nothing else was before him, if once he allowed himself to become an associate of Fricker's in business, a friend of the family at Fricker's house. Such a position as that would stamp him. It was consistent with many good things; it might not prevent some influence and a good deal of power, or plenty of deference of a certain sort from certain people. But it defined his class. Men of the world would know how to place him, and women would not be behind them in perception. He saw all this, but he did not escape. Perhaps there was nowhere to escape to. There was another reason. He had encountered a very vigorous will, and that will was determined that he should stay. His name was a little blown upon, no doubt, but it was a good name; he was M.P. still; he might one day inherit a peerage—not of the ultra-grand Barmouth order, of course, but a peerage all the same. The will was associated with a clear and measured judgment, and in obedience to the judgment the will meant to hold fast to Beaufort Chance.

He himself realised this side of the matter less clearly than he saw the rest. He knew that the business association and the dinners bound him more and more tightly; he had not understood yet that his flirtation with Connie Fricker was likely to commit him in an even more irrevocable and wholesale way. In this Miss Connie was clever; she let an air of irresponsibility soften his attentions into a mere pastime, though she was careful to let nothing more palpable confirm the impression. She made no haste to enlist her mother's aid or to invoke a father primed with decisive questions. She had attractions for Beaufort Chance, a man over whom obvious attractions exercised their full force. She let them have their way. She liked him, and she liked being flirted with. The cool head was quite unseen, far in the background; but it was preparing a very strong position whenever its owner liked to fall back there.

Beaufort Chance, misled by the air of irresponsibility, kissed and laughed, as many men do under such circumstances; Connie was not critical of the quality of kisses, and

the laughter was to go on just so long as she pleased. It was among the visions which inspire rather than dissipate the energy of strong natures, when Connie Fricker saw herself, now become Beaufort's wife and perhaps my lady, throwing a supercilious bow to Mrs. Trevalla, as that lady trudged down Regent Street, seeking bargains in the shops and laden with brown-paper parcels containing the same. Such a turn of fortune as would realise this piquant picture was still possible, notwithstanding Trix's present triumph.

There were dangers. If Mrs. Fricker, with that strict sense of propriety of hers and her theory of its necessity for social progress, came round a corner at the wrong moment, there would be a bad half-hour, and (worse still) the necessity for a premature divulging of plans. Those plans Mrs. Fricker would manage to bungle and spoil; this was, at least, her daughter's unwavering conviction. So Connie was cautious, and urged Beaufort to caution. She smiled to see how readily he owned the advisability of extreme caution. He did not want to be caught, any more than she. She knew the reason of his wish as well as of her own. She played her hand well and is entitled to applause—subject to the accepted reservations.

Meanwhile *delenda erat* Trix. That was well understood in the family, and again between the family and Beaufort Chance. The ladies hinted at it; Fricker's quiet smile was an endorsement; every echo of Trix's grandeur and triumph —far more any distant glimpse obtained of them in actual progress—strengthened the resolution, and enhanced the pleasure of the prospect. Censure without sympathy is seldom right. At last Trix had, under irresistible pressure, obeyed Mervyn to the full. She saw no more of the Frickers; she wrote only on business to Mr. Fricker. The Fricker attitude cannot be called surprising; the epithet is more appropriate to Trix Trevalla's, even though it be remembered that she regarded it as only temporary—just till she was well out of Glowing Stars. She pleaded that her engagement kept her so busy. Other people could be busy too.

Lady Blixworth's doors were still open to Beaufort Chance, and there, one evening, he saw Trix in her splendour. Mervyn was in attendance on her; the Barmouths were not far off, and were receiving congratulations most amiably. In these days Trix's beauty had an animation and expressed an excitement that gave her an added brilliance, though they might not speak of perfect happiness. Lady Blixworth was enjoying a respite from duty, and had sunk into a chair; Beaufort stood by her. He could not keep his eyes from Trix.

'Now, I wonder,' said Lady Blixworth with her gentle deliberation, 'what you're thinking about, Beaufort! Am I very penetrating, or very ignorant, or just merely commonplace, in guessing that Trix Trevalla would do well to avoid you if you had a pistol in your hand?'

'You aren't penetrating,' said he. She had stood by him, so he endured her impertinence, but he endured it badly.

'You don't want to kill her?' she smiled. 'That would be too gentle? Oh, I'm only joking, of course.' This excuse was a frequent accompaniment of her most pointed suggestions.

'She'll have a pretty dull time with Mervyn,' he said with a laugh.

'I suppose that idea always does console the other men? In this case quite properly, I agree. She will, Beaufort; you may depend on that.' Her thoughts had gone back to that Sunday at Barslett.

Glentorly came up the stairs. She greeted him without rising; his bow to Beaufort Chance was almost invisible; he went straight across to Trix and Mervyn. Lady Blixworth cast an amused glance at her companion's lowering face.

'Why don't you go and congratulate her?' she asked. 'I don't believe you ever have!'

'I suppose I ought to,' he said, meeting her malicious look with a deliberate smile.

A glint of aroused interest came into her eyes. Would he have the courage?

'Well, you can hardly interrupt her while she's with Mortimer and George Glentorly.'

'Can't I?' he asked with a laugh. 'Sit here and you shall see.'

'I'd no idea it could be amusing in my own house,' smiled Lady Blixworth. 'Well, I'm sitting here!'

What he saw had roused Beaufort's fury again. Everything helped to that—the sight of Trix, Mervyn's airs of ownership and lofty appropriation of her, the pompous smiles of the Barmouths, most of all, perhaps, that small matter of Lord Glentorly's invisible bow. And he himself was there on the good-natured but contemptuous sufferance of his old friend and malicious mocker, Lady Blixworth. But he had a whip; he was minded at least to crack it over Trix Trevalla.

She was standing by the two men, but they had entered into conversation with one another, and for the moment she was idle. Her eyes, travelling round the room, fell on Beaufort Chance. She flushed, gave him a hurried bow, and glanced in rapid apprehension at Mervyn. He and Glentorly were busy agreeing that they were, jointly and severally, quite entitled to be relied on by the country, and Mervyn saw nothing. Trix's bow gave Beaufort Chance his excuse. Without more ado he walked straight and boldly across the room to her. Still the other two men did not see him. Trix edged a pace away from them and waited his coming; she was in as sore fear as when he had snatched her letter from her in her drawing-room. Her breath came fast; she held her head high.

'You must let an old friend congratulate you, Mrs. Trevalla,' said Beaufort. He spoke low and smiled complacently as he held out his hand.

Trix hated to take it; she took it very graciously, with murmured thanks. She shot an appealing glance past him towards where her hostess sat. Lady Blixworth smiled back, but did not move an inch.

'Though your old friends have seen very little of you lately.'

'People in my position must have allowances made for them, Mr. Chance.'

'Oh, yes; I wasn't complaining, only regretting. Seen anything of our friends the Frickers lately?'

The question was a danger-signal to Trix. He was prepared to pose as the Frickers' friend if only he could tar her with the same brush; that boded mischief.

Fricker's name caught Lord Glentorly's ear; he glanced round. Mervyn still noticed nothing.

'I haven't seen them for a long while,' answered Trix in steady tones, her eyes defying him.

He waited a moment, then he went on, raising his voice a little.

'You must have heard from Fricker anyhow, if not from the ladies? He told me he'd written to you.'

Mervyn turned round sharply. Emerging from the enumeration of the strong points of his Chief and himself, he had become conscious that a man was talking to Trix and saying that some other man had written to her. He looked questioningly at Glentorly; that statesman seemed somewhat at a loss.

'Yes,' Chance went on, 'Fricker said he'd been in correspondence with you about that little venture you're in together. I hope it'll turn up trumps, though it's a bit of a risk in my opinion. But it's too bad to remind you of business here.'

Mervyn stepped forward suddenly.

'If you've any business with Mrs. Trevalla, perhaps she'll avail herself of my help,' he said; 'although hardly at the present moment or here.'

Beaufort Chance laughed. 'Dear me, no,' he answered. 'We've no business, have we, Mrs. Trevalla? I was only joking about a little flutter Mrs. Trevalla has on under the auspices of our common friend—Fricker, you know.'

'I have not the pleasure of knowing Mr. Fricker,' said Mervyn coldly.

'He's at a disadvantage compared with us, isn't he, Mrs. Trevalla?'

Mervyn turned from him in a distaste that he took no pains to conceal, and fixed his eyes on Trix's face. Was it possible—really possible—that she could be charged with having 'a flutter' under the auspices of Fricker, and stand dumb before the accusation?

Trix laughed nervously, and at last managed to speak.

'That's all very ancient history, Mr. Chance. You should have your gossip more up to date.'

'Then you've sold your Glowing Stars?' he retorted quickly. He desired the pleasure of making her lie and of knowing the degradation that she felt.

There was just an instant's pause. Then Lord Glentorly struck in.

'I don't know whether all this is your business,' he said to Beaufort, 'but I do know it isn't mine. If Mrs. Trevalla allows, we'll drop the subject.'

'It's very dull anyhow,' stammered Trix.

'I touched on it quite accidentally,' smiled Beaufort. 'Well, all good wishes again, Mrs. Trevalla.'

With a bow of insolent familiarity he turned on his heel and began to walk back towards Lady Blixworth. After a moment's hesitation Mervyn followed him. Trix darted to Glentorly.

'Take me somewhere,' she whispered. 'Take me away somewhere for a minute.'

'Away from that fellow, yes,' he agreed with a disgusted air.

Trix seemed to hear him imperfectly. 'Yes, yes, away from Mortimer,' she whispered.

The swiftest glance betrayed Glentorly's surprise as he obeyed her; she put her arm in his and he led her into the next room, where a sideboard with refreshments stood.

'What does the fellow mean?' he asked scornfully.

'It's nothing. Give me a little champagne,' said Trix.

Beaufort Chance lounged up to Lady Blixworth.

'Well, you saw me making myself pleasant?' His manner was full of a rude coarse exultation.

Lady Blixworth put up her long-handled *pince-nez* and regarded him through it.

'She hasn't quite cut me, you see,' he went on.

'I beg your pardon, Chance, may I have a word with you?' Mervyn came up and joined them.

Lady Blixworth leant back and looked at the pair. She had never thought Mervyn a genius, and she was very tolerant; yet she had at that moment the fullest possible realisation of the difference between the two: it was between barbarism and civilisation. Both might be stupid, both might on occasion be cruel. But there was the profound difference of method.

'A word with me, Mervyn? Of course.'

'By ourselves, I mean.' His stiffness vigorously refused the approaches of Beaufort's familiarity.

'Oh, all right, by ourselves,' agreed Beaufort with a contemptuous laugh.

Lady Blixworth decided not to indulge her humour any longer; she was distrustful of what might happen.

'You can have your talk any time,' she said, rising. She spoke carelessly, but she knew how to assert her right to social command in her own house. 'Just now I want Mortimer to take me to have something cool. Good-night, Beaufort.' She gave him her hand. He took it, not seeing what else to do. Mervyn had fallen back a step as his bow acknowledged the hostess's command.

'Good-night, Beaufort,' said Lady Blixworth, smiling again.

She left him there, and walked off with Mervyn.

'If you must talk to him, wait,' she advised, laughing. 'Or write to him—that's better. Or let it alone—that's best of all. But at any rate I don't want what the papers call a *fracas*, and I call a shindy, in my house. With your people here too!' The Barmouths' presence would make a shindy seem like sacrilege.

'You're quite right,' he said gravely.

She glanced at him in pity and in ridicule. 'Heavens, how you take things, Mortimer!' she murmured. 'You might have seen that he only wanted to be nasty.'

'He shall have no more opportunities of obtruding himself on Trix.'

'Poor Trix!' sighed Lady Blixworth. It was not quite clear what especial feature of Trix's position she was commiserating.

'I shall speak plainly to him.'

'That's just why I wouldn't let it occur in my house.'

'Why do you have him here?'

'I believe that in the end it's through a consciousness of my own imperfections.' She felt for and with her companion, but she could not help chaffing him again. 'He's had rather hard lines too, you know.'

'He's not had half what he's deserved. I want to see Trix.'

'Oh, put that off too!' She had sighted Trix and Glentorly, and a dexterous pressure of her arm headed him in the opposite direction. 'You must feed me first, anyhow,' she insisted.

Understanding that he had been in effect dismissed from the house, knowing at least that with his hostess's countenance withdrawn from him he would find little comfort there, Beaufort Chance took his departure. His mood was savage: he had gratified revenge at the cost of lowering himself farther; if he had done his best to ruin Trix, he had done something more for himself in the same direction. Yet he had enjoyed the doing of it. A savage triumph struggled with the soreness in him. He had come back to Lady Blixworth to boast to her; Mervyn had spoilt that scheme. He felt the need of recounting his exploit to somebody who would see the glory of it. Connie Fricker had told him that they were going to the opera, and that she supposed there would be some supper afterwards, if he liked to drop in. Almost unconsciously his steps turned towards the house.

Luck favoured him, or so he thought. Fricker and his wife had been dropped at a party on the way home; Connie had no card for it, and was now waiting for them alone—or, rather, was using her time in consuming chicken and champagne. He joined in her meal, and did full justice to one ingredient of it at least. With his glass in his hand he leant back in his chair and began to tell her how he had served Trix Trevalla. Whatever the reality might have been there was no doubt who came out triumphant in the narrative.

Connie had finished her chicken. She leant her plump bare arms on the table and fixed applauding eyes on him.

'Splendid!' she said with a glint of teeth. 'I should love to have seen that.'

'I gave her a bit more than she reckoned on,' he said, lighting his cigar and then tossing off the last of his glass of wine. 'I gave it her straight.' He looked across at Connie. 'That's the only way with women,' he told her.

Miss Connie mingled admiration and a playful defiance in her smile. 'You ought to have married her, then you'd have had your chance,' she suggested.

'Precious glad I didn't!' said Beaufort. 'Good for her, but poor fun for me, Connie.'

Connie got up and came round the table. 'You're spilling all your ash on the tablecloth.' She gave him an ash-tray from the mantel-piece. 'Use that, silly,' said she, patting his shoulder, and she went on, 'Any woman could manage you all right, you know. Oh, I don't mean a goose like Trix Trevalla, but——'

'A clever girl like yourself, eh?'

'Well, that's the last thing I was thinking about. Still, as far as that goes, I expect I could.'

He slewed his chair half round and looked up at her. Her rollicking defiance, with its skilful hint of contempt, worked on his mood. He forgot his daylight reluctance to commit himself.

'We'd see about that, Miss Connie,' he said.

'Oh, I shouldn't be afraid!' she laughed. She spoke the truth; she was not the least afraid of Beaufort Chance, though she was more than a little afraid of Mrs. Fricker. She was at the same time fully aware that Chance would like to think that she was in her heart rather afraid; she gauged him nicely, and the bravado of her declaration was allowed to be hinted at by a fall and a turning-away of her eyes. With a confident laugh he slipped his arm round her waist; she drew away; he held her strongly.

'Be quiet,' he said imperiously.

She stood still, apparently embarrassed but yet obedient.

'Why did you try to get away?' he asked almost threateningly.

'Well, I'm quiet enough now,' she pleaded with a low laugh.

His self-complacency was restored; the buffets of the evening were forgotten. He remembered how he had served Trix Trevalla; he forgot what that pleasure had entailed on himself. Now he was showing this girl that she was no match for him. He held her in his grasp while he smoked.

'This is rather dull for me,' suggested Connie after a while. 'I hope you like it, Mr. Chance?'

'It'll last just as long as I do like it,' he told her.

A bell sounded; they heard the hall door opened and voices in the hall.

'Listen! Let me go! No, you must. It's papa and mamma.'

'Never mind. Stay where you are.'

'What do you mean? Nonsense! I must——!' In genuine alarm Connie wrenched herself away, ran to the door, listened, gave Beaufort a wise nod, and sat down opposite to him. He laughed at her across the table.

After a pause a footman came in.

'I was to tell you that Mrs. Fricker has gone straight upstairs, miss. She'd like to see you for a minute in her room when you go up, miss.'

'All right. Say I'll be there in five minutes. Where's papa?'

'Mr. Fricker's gone into the study, miss.'

'We're in luck,' said Beaufort, when the door was closed.

'I must go in a minute or two. I expect mamma doesn't like me being here with you. It's not my fault. I didn't know you were coming. I didn't let you in.'

'Of course it's not your fault. We'll tell mamma so.'

'I think you'd better go,' suggested Connie; he treated Mrs. Fricker with too much flippancy.

'Yes, I will. I'll join your father and have a whisky-and-soda. But say good-night first, Connie.'

'Oh, well, be quick then,' said Connie.

Now, as it happened, through an oversight, there was no whisky-and-soda in the study. Mr. Fricker discovered this disconcerting circumstance when he had got into his smoking-jacket and slippers. He swore gently and walked out, his slippers passing noiselessly over the rich carpets of his passages. He opened the door of the dining-room and came in. To his amazement his daughter whirled quickly across his path, almost cannoning into him; and there, whence she came, Beaufort Chance stood, looking foolish and awkward. Connie was flushed and her hair untidy.

'Good evening, Beaufort. I was looking for whisky-and-soda, Connie dear.'

A few more remarks were interchanged, but the talk came chiefly from Beaufort, and consisted of explanations why he had not gone before, and how he was just going now. Then he did go, shaking hands with them both, not looking either of them in the face.

'You can find your own way?' Fricker suggested, as he picked a chicken's leg. 'Give me a little more soda, Connie.'

She obeyed him, and, when they were alone, came and stood on the opposite side of the table. Fricker ate and drank in undisturbed composure. At last he observed:—

'I thought your mother wanted you. Hadn't you better

go up to her, Connie?' He glanced round at the clock and smiled at his daughter in his thoughtful way.

'Of course you can tell her; but you'll spoil it all, if you do,' Connie burst out. She seemed ready to cry, being sadly put out by her father's premature discovery, and undisguisedly alarmed as to what view might be taken of the matter.

'Spoil it all?' repeated Fricker meditatively. 'All what? Your fun, my dear?'

Connie had no alternative but to play her trumps.

'It's more than fun,' she said. 'Unless I'm interfered with,' she added resentfully.

'Your mother's ideas are so strict,' smiled Fricker, wiping his mouth and laying aside his napkin. 'If she'd come in when I did—eh, Connie?' He shook his head and delicately picked his teeth.

'It's all right if—if you let me alone.' She came round to him. 'I can take care of myself, and——' She sat on the arm of his chair. 'It wouldn't be so bad, would it?' she asked.

'Hum. No, perhaps it wouldn't,' admitted Fricker. 'Do you like him, Connie?'

'We should manage very well, I think,' she laughed, feeling easier in her mind. 'But if you tell mamma now——'

'We upset the apple-cart, do we, Connie?' He fell into thought. 'Might do worse, and perhaps shouldn't do much better, eh?'

'I daresay not. And'—an unusual timidity for the moment invaded Miss Connie's bearing—'and I do rather like him, papa.'

Fricker had the family affections, and to him his daughter seemed well-nigh all that a daughter could be expected to be. She had her faults, of course—a thing not calculated to surprise Fricker—but she was bright, lively, pretty, clever, dutiful, and very well behaved. So long as she was also reasonable, he would stretch a point to please her; he would

at least make every consideration on her side of the case weigh as heavily as possible. He thought again, reviewing Beaufort Chance in the new light.

'Well, run it for yourself,' he said at last.

Connie bent down and kissed him. She was blushing and she looked happy.

'Now run off upstairs.'

'You won't tell mamma?'

'Not if you can go on managing it all right.'

Connie kissed him again. Then she, in her turn, looked at the clock.

'May I say that Mr. Chance has been gone ever so long, and that you made me stay with you?'

'Yes,' said Fricker, rather amused.

'Good-night, you darling,' cried Connie, and danced out of the room.

'Rum creatures!' ejaculated Fricker. 'She's got a head on her shoulders, though.'

On the whole he was well pleased. But he had the discernment to wonder how Beaufort Chance would feel about the matter the next morning. He chuckled at this idea at first, but presently his peculiar smile regained its sway—the same smile that he wore when he considered the case of Trix Trevalla and Glowing Stars.

'What Beaufort thinks of it,' he concluded as he went up to bed, 'won't be quite the question.'

He found Mrs. Fricker not at all displeased with Connie.

CHAPTER XIII

JUSTIFICATION NUMBER FOUR

TRIX TREVALLA was at Barslett. To say that she was in prison there would be perhaps a strong expression. To call her sojourn quarantine is certainly a weak one; we are not preached at in quarantine. Mervyn came down twice a week; the Barmouths themselves and Mrs. Bonfill completed the party. No guests were invited. Trix was to stay a month. A tenant had offered for the flat—it was let for the month. Trix was to stay at Barslett with the Barmouths and Mrs. Bonfill—a Mrs. Bonfill no longer indulgent or blinded by partiality—hopeful still, indeed, but with open eyes, with a clear appreciation of dear Trix's failings, possessed by an earnest desire to co-operate with the Barmouths in eradicating the same.

No ordinary pressure had brought Trix to this. It dated from Beaufort Chance's attack; that had rendered her really defenceless. She remembered how she drove away with the Barmouths and Mervyn, the ominous heavy silence, the accusing peck of a kiss that her future mother-in-law gave her when they parted. Next morning came the interview with Mervyn, the inevitable interview. She had to confess to prevarication and shuffling; nothing but his grave and distressed politeness saved her the word 'lie.' Her dealings with Fricker were wrung from her by a persistent questioning, a steady adherence to the point that neither tears nor wiles (she tried both) could affect. She had no strength left at the end. She wrote to Fricker to sell her Glowing Stars, to send the money to the bank, to close the transaction finally. She

did not know where she would be left; she obeyed, and, broken in spirit, she consented to be deported to Barslett as soon as her letter was posted. Mrs. Bonfill was procured; the Barmouths made the sacrifice (the expression was Lady Barmouth's own); Mervyn arranged to run down. Never were more elaborate or imposing means taken to snatch a brand from the burning.

Yet only at Barslett did the real discipline begin; from morning prayers at nine to evening lemonade at ten-thirty, all day and every day, it seemed to last. They did not indeed all belabour her every day; the method was more scientific. If Lord Barmouth was affable, it meant a lecture after lunch from his wife; when Mrs. Bonfill relaxed in the daytime, it foreboded a serious affectionate talk with Mervyn in the evening. One heavy castigation a day was certain—that, and lots of time to think it over, and, as an aggravation, full knowledge of the occurrence manifest in the rest of the company. Who shall say that Beaufort Chance had not taken rich revenge?

Trix tried to fight sometimes, especially against Mrs. Bonfill. What business was it of Mrs. Bonfill's? The struggle was useless. Mrs. Bonfill established herself firmly *in loco parentis*. 'You have no mother, my dear,' she would reply with a sad shake of her head. The bereavement was small profit to poor Trix under the circumstances. Yet she held on with the old tenacity that had carried her through the lodging-houses, with the endurance which had kept her alive through her four years with Vesey Trevalla. This state of things could not last. With her marriage would come a change. At any rate the subject of her sins must show exhaustion soon. Let her endure; let her do anything rather than forfeit the prospects she had won, rather than step down from the pedestal of grandeur on which she still sat before the world. What does the world know or reck of thorns in exalted cushions? The reflection, which ought to console only the world, seems to bring a curious comfort to the dignified sufferers on the cushions also.

Another hope bore her up. Beneath the Barmouth stateliness was a shrewdness that by no means made light of material things. When she was being severely lectured she had cried once or twice, 'Anyhow I shall make a lot of money!' Fresh reproofs had followed, but they had sounded less convinced. Trix felt that she would be a little better able to stand up for herself if she could produce thousands made under the hated auspices of Fricker; she would at least be able to retire from her nefarious pursuits without being told that she was a fool as well as all the rest of it. She waited still on Fricker.

'I shall never do it again, of course,' she said to Mrs. Bonfill, 'but if it all goes well I do think that no more need be said about it.'

Mrs. Bonfill made concessions to this point of view.

'Let us hope it will be so, my dear. I think myself that your faults have been mainly of taste.'

'At any rate I'm not silly,' she protested to Mervyn. 'You mayn't like the man, but he knows his business.'

'I certainly hope you won't have to add pecuniary loss to the other disagreeable features of the affair,' said Mervyn; and a few minutes later, apparently as an afterthought, he asked her carelessly how much she would make on the best hypothesis. Trix named a moderate figure but a substantial one.

'And I suppose the rogue'll make twice as much himself!' There was reluctant envy in Mervyn's tone. It gave Trix courage. Could she brandish winnings in their faces, she felt sure that the lecturers would be less severe and she less helpless before them.

Meanwhile, with the impulse to make a friend among her gaolers, with her woman's instinct for the likeliest, she was all dutifulness and affection towards Barmouth. She made way with him. The success helped her a little, but less than it would have because of his reverence for his son.

'How such an affectionate well-mannered young woman

could be led so far astray is inexplicable to me—inexplicable,' he observed to Mrs. Bonfill.

Mrs. Bonfill endorsed his bewilderment with a helpless wave of her hand.

'There is good in her,' he announced. 'She will respond to Mortimer's influence.' And the good gentleman began to make things a little easier for Trix within the narrow sphere of his ability. Nobody, of course, had ever told him that the sphere was narrow, and he had not discovered it; his small semi-surreptitious indulgences were bestowed with a princely flourish.

Lady Barmouth was inexorable; she was Mervyn's outraged mother. She had, moreover, the acuteness to discern one of the ideas that lay in Trix's mind and stiffened it to endurance.

'Now is the time to mould her,' she said to Mrs. Bonfill. 'It would not perhaps be so easy presently.'

Mrs. Bonfill knew what 'presently' meant, and thought that her friend was probably right.

'But once we imbue her with our feeling about things, she will keep it. At present she is receptive.'

'I think she is,' agreed Mrs. Bonfill, who had just an occasional pang of pity for Trix's extreme receptivity and the ample advantage taken of it.

Trix had received a brief note from Fricker, saying that he was doing his best to carry out her instructions, and hoped to be able to arrange matters satisfactorily, although he must obviously be hampered in some degree by the peremptory nature of her request. Trix hardly saw why this was obvious, but, if obvious, at any rate it was also quite inevitable. She certainly did not realise what an excellent excuse she had equipped Mr. Fricker with if he sold her shares at a loss. But apparently he had not sold them, at least no news came to that effect; hope that he was waiting to effect a great *coup* still shot in one encouraging streak across the deadly weariness of being imbued with the Barmouth feeling about things. Not once a day, but once

every hour at least, did she recall that unregenerate impulse of Lady Blixworth's, confessed to at this very Barslett, and accord it her heartiest sympathy.

'But I will stick to it,' she said to herself grimly. Her pluck was in arms; her time would come; for the present all hung on Fricker.

It was a beautiful July evening when his letter came. Trix had just escaped from a long talk with Mervyn. He had been rather more affectionate, rather less didactic than usual; something analogous to what the law calls a Statute of Limitations seemed gradually to be coming into his mind as within the sphere of practical domestic politics; not an amnesty, that was going too far, but the possibility of saying no more about it some day. Trix was hopeful as she wandered into the garden, and, sitting down by the fountain, let the gentle breeze blow on her face. It comforted her still to look at the *façade* and the gardens; she got from the contemplation of them much the same quality of pleasure as Airey Newton drew from the sight of his safe and his red-leather book.

A footman brought her two letters. One was from Peggy Ryle, a rigmarole of friendly gossip, ending with, 'We're all having a splendid time, and we all hope you are too. Everybody sent their love to you last night at supper.' With a wistful smile Trix laid this letter down. What different meanings that word 'splendid' may bear, to be sure!

The other letter—it was from Fricker! Fricker at last! A hasty glance round preceded the opening of it. It was rather long. She read and re-read, passing her hand across her brow; indeed she could hardly understand it, though Fricker was credited by his friends with an unrivalled power of conveying his meaning with precision and nicety. He had tried to obey her instructions. Unfortunately there had been no market. Perforce he had waited. He had been puzzled, had Fricker, and waited to make inquiries. Alas! the explanation had not been long in coming. First, the lode had suddenly narrowed. On the top of this calamity had come

a fire in the mine, and much damage to the property. The directors had considered whether it would not be wise to suspend operations altogether, but had in the end resolved to go on. Mr. Fricker doubted their wisdom, but there it was. The decision entailed a call of five shillings per share—of course Mrs. Trevalla would remember that the shares were only five shillings paid. The directors hoped that further calls would not be necessary; here Fricker was sadly sceptical again. Meanwhile, there was no chance of selling; to be plain, Glowing Star shares would not just now be a welcome gift to anyone, let alone an eligible purchase. So, since sale was impossible, payment of the call was inevitable. Then came the end. 'Of course, mines are not Consols; nobody knows that better than yourself. I regret the unlucky issue of this venture. I cannot help thinking that things would have gone better if we had been in closer touch, and I had enjoyed more ready access to you. But I was forced to doubt my welcome, and so was, perhaps, led into not keeping you as thoroughly *au fait* with what was going on as I should have liked. I cannot blame myself for this, however much I regret it. I gather that you do not intend to undertake any further operations, or I would console yourself and myself by saying "Better luck next time!" As matters stand (I refer, of course, to your last letter to me), I can only again express my regret that Glowing Stars have been subject to such bad luck, and that I find myself, thanks to your own desire, not in a position to help you to recoup your losses.' A postscript added, 'For your convenience I may remind you that your present holding is four thousand shares.'

The last part of the letter was easier to understand than the first. It needed no re-reading. 'You've chosen to drop me. Shift for yourself, and pay your own shot.' That was what Mr. Fricker said when it was translated into the terse brevity of a vulgar directness. The man's cold relentlessness spoke in every word. Not only Beaufort Chance, not only the Barmouths and Mrs. Bonfill, not only Mortimer Mervyn, had lessons to teach and scourges wherewith to enforce them.

Fricker had his lesson to give and his scourge to brandish too.

Again Trix Trevalla looked round, this time in sheer panic. She crumpled up Fricker's letter and thrust it into her pocket. She saw Peggy Ryle's in her lap—Peggy who was having a splendid time! Trix got up and fairly ran into the house, choking down her sobs.

Ten minutes later Mervyn strolled out, looking for her. He did not find her, but he came upon an envelope lying on the ground near the fountain—a long-shaped business envelope. It was addressed to Mrs. Trevalla, and at the back it bore an oval impressed stamp 'S. F. & Co.'

'Ah, she's heard from Fricker! That's the end of the whole thing, I hope!' He felt glad of that, so glad that he added in a gentle and pitying tone, 'Poor little Trix, we must keep her out of mischief in future!' He looked at his watch, pocketed the envelope (he was a very orderly man), paced up and down for a few minutes, and then went in to dress for dinner. As he dressed a pleasant little idea came into his head; he would puzzle Trix by his cleverness; he meditated what, coming from a less eminent young man, would have been called 'a score.'

At dinner Trix was bright and animated; Mervyn's manner was affectionate; the other three exchanged gratified glances—Trix was becoming imbued with the Barmouth feeling about things, even (as it seemed) to the extent of sharing the Barmouth ideas as to a merry evening.

'You're brilliant to-night, Trix—brilliant,' Lord Barmouth assured her.

'Oh, she can be!' declared Mrs. Bonfill, with a return to the 'fond mother' style of early days.

Lady Barmouth looked slightly uneasy and changed the subject; after all, brilliancy was hardly Barmouthian.

When the servants had gone and the port came (Mervyn did not drink it, but his father did), Mervyn perceived his moment: the presence of the others was no hindrance; had not Trix's punishment been as public as her sin? If she

were forgiven, the ceremony should certainly be in the face of the congregation.

'So you heard from Mr. Fricker to-day?' he said to Trix.

He did not mean to trap her, only, as explained, to raise a cry of admiration by telling how he came to know and producing the envelope. But in an instant Trix suspected a trap and was on the alert; she had the vigilance of the hunted; her brain worked at lightning speed. In a flash of salvation the picture of herself crumpling up the letter rose before her; the letter, yes, but the envelope? In the result Mervyn's 'score' succeeded to a marvel.

'Yes, but how did you know?' she cried, apparently in boundless innocent astonishment.

'Ah!' said he archly. 'Now how did I know?' He produced the envelope and held it up before her eyes. 'You'd never make a diplomatist, Trix!'

'I dropped it in the garden!'

'And, as I was naturally looking for you, I found it!'

He was not disappointed of his sensation. The thing was simple indeed, but neat.

'I notice everything too—everything,' observed Lord Barmouth, with the air of explaining an occurrence otherwise very astonishing.

'It's quite true, Robert does,' Lady Barmouth assured Mrs. Bonfill.

'Wonderful!' ejaculated that lady with friendly heartiness.

Lord Barmouth cleared his throat. 'So far as possible from that quarter, good news, I hope?'

Trix had postponed making up her mind what to say; she did not mean to mention Fricker's letter till the next morning, and hoped that she would see her way a little clearer then. She was denied the respite. They all waited for her answer.

'Oh, don't let's talk business at dinner! I'll tell you about it afterwards,' she said.

Mervyn interposed with a suave but peremptory request.

'My dear, it must be on our minds. Just tell us in a word.'

Her brain, still working at express speed, seeming indeed as though it could never again drop to humdrum pace, pictured the effect of the truth and the Barmouth way of looking at the truth. She had no hope but that the truth —well, most of the truth anyhow—must come some day; but she must tell it to Mervyn alone, at her own time; she would not and could not tell it to them all there and then.

'It's very good,' she said coolly. 'I don't understand quite how good, but quite good.'

'And the whole thing's finished?' asked Mrs. Bonfill.

'Absolutely finished,' assented Trix.

Lord Barmouth sighed and looked round the table; his air was magnanimous in the extreme.

'I think we must say, "All's well that ends well!"' Trix was next him; he patted her hand as it lay on the table.

That was going just a little too far.

'It ends well—and it ends!' amended Mervyn with affectionate authority. Lady Barmouth nodded approval to Mrs. Bonfill.

'Oh, yes, it ends,' said Trix Trevalla.

Her face felt burning hot; she wondered whether its colour tallied with the sensation. Despair was in her heart; she had lied again, and lied for no ultimate good. She rather startled Lady Barmouth by asking for a glass of port. Lord Barmouth, in high good-humour, poured it out gallantly, and then, with obvious tact, shifted the talk to a discussion of his son's public services, pointing out incidentally how the qualities that had rendered these possible had in his own case displayed themselves in a sphere more private, but not, as he hoped, less useful. Mervyn agreed that his father had been quite as useful as himself. Even Mrs. Bonfill stifled a yawn.

The end of dinner came. Trix escaped into the garden, leaving the ladies in the drawing-room, the men still at the table. Her brain was painting scenes with broad rapid strokes of the brush. She saw herself telling Mervyn, she saw his face, his voice, his horrified amazement. Then came she herself waiting while he told the others. Next there was the facing of the family. What would they do? Would they turn her out? That would be a bitter short agony. Or would they not rather keep her in prison and school her again? She would come to them practically a pauper now. Besides all there had been against her before, she would now stand confessed a pauper and a fool. One, too, who had lied about the thing to the very end! In the dark of evening the great house loomed like a very prison. The fountains were silent, the birds at rest; a heavy stillness added to the dungeon-like effect. She walked quickly, furiously, along one path after another, throwing uneasy glances over her shoulder, listening for a footfall, as though she were in literal truth being tracked and hunted from her lair. The heart was out of her: at last her courage was broken. What early hardships, what Vesey Trevalla, what Beaufort Chance himself could not do, that Fricker and the Barmouths had done—Fricker's idea of what was necessary in business relations and the Barmouth way of feeling about things. There was no fight left in Trix Trevalla.

Unless it were for one desperate venture, the height of courage or of cowardice—which she knew not, and it signified nothing. She had ceased to think. She had little but a blind instinct urging her to hide herself.

'This is very fortunate, Mortimer,' observed Barmouth over his port. He did not take coffee; Mervyn did.

'The best possible thing under the circumstances. I don't think I need say much more to her.'

'I think not. She understands now how we feel. Perhaps we could hardly expect her to realise it until she had enjoyed the full opportunities her stay here has given her.' Who now should call him narrow-minded?

'I have very little fear for the future,' said Mervyn.

'You have every reason to hope. I wonder—er—how much she has made?' Mervyn frowned slightly. 'Well, well, it's better to win than lose,' Barmouth added, with a propitiatory smile.

'Of course. But——'

'You don't like the subject? Of course not! No more do I. Shall we join the ladies? A moment, Mortimer. Would you rather speak to her yourself? Or should your mother—— ?'

'Oh, no. There's really nothing. Leave it to me.'

Lady Barmouth and Mrs. Bonfill were drinking tea from ancestral china.

'Mortimer is quiet, but he's very firm,' Lady Barmouth was saying. 'I think we need fear no—no outbreaks in the future.'

'A firm hand will do no harm with Trix. But with proper management she'll be a credit to him.'

'I really think we can hope so, Sarah. Where is she, by the way?'

'She's gone to her room. I don't think she'll come down again to-night from what my maid said just now when I met her.' Mrs. Bonfill paused and added, 'She must have been under a strain, you know.'

'She should have been prepared for that. However Mortimer doesn't go to town till the afternoon to-morrow.' There would be plenty of time for morals to be pointed.

Mervyn seemed hardly surprised at not finding Trix. He agreed that the next day would serve, and took himself off to read papers and write letters; by doing the work to-night he would save a post. Lord Barmouth put on a woollen cap, wrapped a Shetland shawl round his shoulders, and said that he would go for a stroll. This form of words was well understood; it was no infrequent way of his to take a look round his domains in the evening; there were sometimes people out at night who ought to be indoors, and, on the other hand, the fireside now and then beguiled a night-

watchman from his duties. Such little irregularities, so hard to avoid in large establishments, were kept in check by Lord Barmouth's evening strolls—'prowls' they were called in other quarters of the house than those occupied by the family itself. The clock struck ten as the worthy nobleman set forth on his mission of law, order, and, it may happily be added, personal enjoyment. He was armed with a spud and a bull's-eye lantern.

The night-watchman was asleep by the fire in the engine-room. Justification number one for the excursion. Her ladyship's own maid was talking to Lord Mervyn's own man in a part of the premises rigorously reserved for the men who lived over the stables. Justification, cumulative justification, number two. Lord Barmouth turned into the shrubbery, just to see whether the little gate leading on to the high road was locked, according to the strict orders given. It was not locked. Justification, triumphant and crowning justification, number three!

'It's scandalous—scandalous,' murmured Lord Barmouth in something very like gratification. Many people would miss their chief pleasure were their neighbours and dependants void of blame.

He turned back at a brisk pace; he had no key to the gate himself, the night-watchman had; the night-watchman did not seem to be in luck's way to-night. Lord Barmouth's step was quick and decisive, his smile sour; leaving that gate unlocked was a capital offence, and he was eager to deal punishment. But suddenly he came to a pause on the narrow path.

Justification number four! A woman came towards him, hurrying along with rapid frightened tread. She was making for the gate. The nefariousness of the scheme thus revealed infuriated Barmouth. He stepped aside behind a tree and waited till she came nearer. She wore a large hat and a thick veil; she turned her head back several times, as though to listen behind her. He flashed his lantern on her and saw a dark skirt with a light silk petticoat showing an

inch or two below. He conceived the gravest suspicions of the woman—a thing that perhaps need not be considered unreasonable. He stepped out on the path, and walked towards her, hiding the light of the lantern again.

'Who are you, ma'am? What are you doing here? Where do you come from?' His peremptory questions came like pistol-shots.

She turned her head towards him, starting violently. But after that she stood still and silent.

'I am Lord Barmouth. I suppose you know me? What's your business here?'

She was silent still.

'Nonsense! You have no business here, and you know it. You must give me an account of yourself, ma'am, or I shall find a way to make you.'

She gave an account of herself; with trembling ungloved hands she raised her veil. He turned his lantern on her face and recoiled from her with a clumsy spring.

'You?' he gasped. 'You? Trix? Are you mad? Where are you going?'

Her face was pale and hard-lined; her eyes were bright, and looked scarcely sane in the concentrated glare of the lantern.

'Let me pass,' she said in a low shaken voice.

'Let you pass! Where to? Nonsense! You're——'

'Let me pass,' she commanded again.

'No,' he answered, barring her path with his broad squat form. Decision rang in his tones.

'You must,' she said simply. She put out her arms and thrust at him. He was heavy to move, but he was driven on one side; the nervous fury in her arms sent him staggering back; he dropped his lantern and saved himself with his spud.

'Trix!' he cried in helpless rage and astonishment.

'No, no, no!' she sobbed out as she darted past him, pulling her veil down again and making for the gate. She ran now, sobbing convulsively, and catching up her skirts

high over her ankles. The manner of her running scandalised Lord Barmouth hardly less than the fact of it.

'Trix! Trix!' he shouted imperiously, and started in pursuit of her. She did not turn again, nor speak again. She rushed through the gate, slamming it behind her. It swung to in his face as he came up. Snatching it open, he held it with his hand; she was ten or fifteen yards down the road, running with a woman's short, shuffling, flat-footed stride, but making good headway all the same; still he heard her sobs, more convulsive now for shortness of breath.

'Good God!' said Lord Barmouth, helplessly staring after her.

Justifications one, two, and three were driven clean out of his head. Justification number four made matter enough for any brain to hold—and the night-watchman was in luck's way after all.

He stood there till he could neither hear nor see her; then, leaving the gate ajar, he wrapped his shawl closer round him, picked up his lantern, and walked slowly home. An alarm or a pursuit did not occur to him. He was face to face with something that he did not understand, but he understood enough to see that at this moment nothing could be done.

The great *façade* of the house was dark, save for two windows. Behind one Mervyn worked steadily at his papers. Behind the other lights flared in the room that had belonged to Trix—flared on the disorder of her dinner-gown flung aside, her bag half-packed and thus abandoned, Fricker's letter torn across and lying in the middle of the floor.

Barmouth must be pardoned his bewilderment. The whole affair was so singularly out of harmony with the Barmouth feelings and the Barmouth ways.

CHAPTER XIV

A HOUSE OF REFUGE

PEGGY RYLE was alone in lodgings in Harriet Street, near Covent Garden. Elfreda Flood had gone on tour, having obtained a part rich in possibilities, at a salary sufficient for necessities. Under conditions which lacked both these attractions Horace Harnack had joined the same company; so that, according to Miles Childwick, the worst was expected. Considering the paucity of amusement and the multitude of churches in provincial cities, what else could be looked for from artistic and impressionable minds? At this time Miles was affecting a tone about marriage which gave Mrs. John Maturin valuable hints for her new pessimistic novel.

The lodgings wavered between being downright honest lodgings and setting up to be a flat—this latter on the strength of being shut off from the rest of the mansion (the word found authority in the 'To let' notices outside) by a red-baize door with a bolt that did not act. This frail barrier passed, you came to Elfreda's room first, then, across the passage, to the sitting-room, then to Peggy's on the right again. There were cupboards where cooking was done and the charwoman abode by day, and where you could throw away what you did not want or thought your partner could not; mistakes sometimes occurred and had to be atoned for by the surrender of articles vitally indispensable to the erring party.

Needless to say, the lodgings were just now the scene of boundless hospitality; it would have been sumptuous also but for the charwoman's immutable and not altogether

unfounded belief that Peggy was ruining herself. The charwoman always forgot the luxuries; as the guests never believed in them, no harm was done. Peggy flitted in and out to change her frock, seldom settling down in her home till twelve or one o'clock at night. She was in a state of rare contentment, an accretion to the gaiety that was hers by nature. Somehow perplexities had disappeared; they used to be rather rife, for she had a vivid imagination, apt to pick out the attractions of any prospect or any individual, capable of presenting its owner as enjoying exceeding happiness with any person and in any station of life, and thus of producing impulses which had occasionally resulted in the perplexities which were now—somehow—a matter of the past. The change of mood dated from the day when Peggy had made her discovery about Airey Newton and given her word of honour to Tommy Trent; it was nursed in the deepest secrecy, its sole overt effect being to enable Peggy to receive any amount of attention with frank and entirely unperturbed gratitude. If she were misunderstood—— But there must really be an end of the idea that we are bound to regulate our conduct by the brains of the stupidest man in the room. 'And they have the fun of it,' Peggy used to reflect, in much charity with herself and all men.

That night, in Lady Blixworth's conservatory, she had refused the hand of Mr. Stapleton-Staines (son of that Sir Stapleton who had an estate bordering on Barslett, and had agreed with Lord Barmouth that you could not touch pitch without being defiled), and she drove home with hardly a regret at having thrown away the prospect of being a county gentlewoman. She was no more than wondering gently if there were any attractions at all about the life. She had also the feeling of a good evening's work, not disturbed in the least degree by the expression of Lady Blixworth's face when she and Mr. Staines parted at the door of the conservatory, and Mr. Staines took scowling leave of his hostess. She lay back in her cab, smiling at the world.

On her doorstep sat two gentlemen in opera hats and long

brown coats. They were yawning enormously, and had long ceased any effort at conversation. They had the street to themselves save for a draggled-looking woman who wandered aimlessly about on the other side of the road, a policeman who seemed to have his eye on the woman and on them alternately, and a wagon laden with vegetables that ground its way along to the market. Peggy's hansom drove up. The two men jumped joyfully to their feet and assumed expressions of intense disgust; the policeman found something new to watch; the draggled woman turned her head towards the house and stood looking on.

'Punctual as usual!' said Miles Childwick encouragingly. 'Eleven to the moment!'

The clock of St. Paul's, Covent Garden, struck 12.30.

'Here's the key,' said Peggy helpfully. 'Have you half a crown, Tommy?'

'I have a florin, and it's three-quarters of a mile.'

Peggy looked defiant for a minute; then she gave a funny little laugh. 'All right,' said she.

They went in. The policeman yawned and resumed his stroll; the woman, after a moment's hesitation, walked slowly round the corner and down towards the Strand.

Arrived upstairs, Peggy darted at the table; a telegram lay there. She tore it open.

'They've done it!' she cried exultantly.

'What church?' asked Childwick resignedly.

'I mean they're engaged.'

'When?' inquired Tommy, who was busy with soda-water.

'6.45,' answered Peggy, consulting the stamp on the telegram.

'They might have waited till the hour struck,' remarked Childwick in a disgusted tone.

'Isn't it splendid?' insisted Peggy.

'You say something proper, Tommy, old boy.' Childwick was ostentatiously overcome.

'Is it a—an enthusiastic telegram?' asked Tommy, after a drink.

'No. She only says they're the happiest people in the world.'

'If it's no worse than that, we can sit down to supper.' Mr. Childwick proceeded to do so immediately.

'I ordered lobsters,' said Peggy, as she threw her cloak away and appeared resplendent in her best white frock.

'The mutton's here all right,' Childwick assured her. 'And there's a good bit left.'

'What that pair propose to live on——' began Tommy, as he cut the loaf.

'The diet is entirely within the discretion of the Relieving Officer,' interrupted Childwick.

'I'm so glad she's done it while I've got some money left. Shall I give her a bracelet or a necklace, or—could I give her a tiara, Tommy?'

'A tiara or two, I should say,' smiled Tommy.

'It's awfully hot!' Peggy rose, pulled up the blind, and flung the window open. 'Let's drink their health. Hurrah!'

Their shouts made the policeman smile, and caused the woman, who, having gone down round the west corner, had come up again and turned into the street from the east, to look up to the lights in the window; then she leant against the railings opposite and watched the lights. The policeman, after a moment's consideration, began to walk towards her very slowly, obviously desiring it to be understood that he was not thereby committed to any definite action; he would approach a crowd on the pavement, having some invisible centre of disturbance or interest, with the same strictly provisional air.

'And how was our friend Lady Blixworth?' asked Tommy.

'She looked tired, and said she'd been taking Audrey Pollington about. She's the most treacherous accomplice I know.'

'She's like Miles here. Nothing's sacred if a good gibe's possible.'

'Nothing ought to be sacred at which a good gibe—a good one—is possible,' Childwick maintained.

'Oh, I only meant something smart,' explained Tommy contemptuously.

'Then don't deviate into careless compliment. It causes unnecessary conversation, and the mutton is far from bad, though not far from being finished.'

'If only the lobsters——' began Peggy plaintively.

'I do not believe in the lobsters,' said Childwick firmly.

'Then she asked me after Trix Trevalla—— Why, there's a knock!'

It was true. The policeman had at last approached the woman with a step that spoke of a formed decision. To his surprise she suddenly exclaimed in an impatient voice, 'Oh, well, if they're going to stay all night, I can't wait,' and crossed the road. He followed her to the doorstep.

'This isn't where you live,' he said, as though kindness suggested the information.

'No, it isn't,' she agreed.

'Come now, where do you live?'

'I don't know,' she answered, seeming puzzled and tired 'My flat's let, you see.'

'Oh, is it?' Sarcasm became predominant in the policeman's voice. 'Taken it for the Maharajeer of Kopang, have they?' A prince bearing that title was a visitor to London at this time, and was creating considerable interest.

'Nonsense!' said she with asperity, and she knocked, adding, 'I know the lady who lives up there.'

'There's a woman on the doorstep—and a policeman!' cried Peggy to her companions; she had run to the window and put her head out.

'Now, Tommy, which has come for you and which for me?' asked Childwick.

'Stay where you are,' said Peggy. 'I'll go down and see.'

In spite of Tommy's protests—Childwick made none—she insisted on going alone. The fact is that she had two or

three friends who were habitually in very low water; it was just possible that this might be one who was stranded altogether.

The men waited; they heard voices below, they heard the hall-door shut, there were steps on the stairs, the red-baize door swung on its hinges.

'She's brought her up,' said Childwick. 'Where are our hats, Tommy?'

'Wait a bit, we may be wanted,' suggested Tommy.

'That's why I proposed to go,' murmured Childwick.

'Rot, old fellow,' was Tommy's reception of this affected discretion. He went to the window and craned his neck out. 'The policeman's gone,' he announced with some relief. 'That's all right anyhow!'

'All right? Our only protection gone! Mark you, Tommy, we're in luck if we don't have our pictures in a philanthropic publication over this.'

'Where have they gone? Into one of the bedrooms, I suppose.'

The door opened and Peggy ran in. Her eyes were wide with astonishment; excitement was evident in her manner; there was a stain of mud on the skirt of her best white frock.

'The whisky!' she gasped, clutched it, and fled out again.

'Now we know the worst,' said Miles, turning his empty glass upside down.

'Don't be a fool, Miles,' suggested Tommy, a little impatiently.

'I'll stop as soon as there's anything else to do,' retorted Miles tranquilly.

Peggy reappeared with the whisky. She set it down on the table and spoke to them.

'I want you both to go now and to say nothing.'

They glanced at one another and turned to their coats. In unbroken silence they put them on, took their hats, and held out their hands to Peggy. She began to laugh; there were tears in her eyes.

'You may say good-night,' she told them.

'Good-night, Peggy.'

'Good-night, Peggy.'

'Good-night—and I should like to kiss you both,' said Peggy Ryle. 'You're not to say anybody came, you know.'

They nodded, and went into the passage.

'I shall come and see you soon,' Peggy told Tommy Trent, as she shut the baize door behind them. Then she turned into Elfreda's room. 'Come and have some supper now,' she said.

Trix Trevalla caught her by the hands and kissed her. 'You look so pretty and so happy, dear,' she sighed; 'and I'm such a guy!'

The term hardly described her pale strained face, feverishly bright eyes, and the tangle of brown hair which hung in disorderly masses round her brow. She had thrown off her wet jacket and skirt, and put on a tea-gown of Elfreda Flood's; her feet were in the same lady's second-best slippers. Peggy led her into the sitting-room and made her eat.

'I didn't tell them who you were. And anyhow they wouldn't say anything,' she assured the wanderer.

'Well, who am I?' asked Trix. 'I hardly know. I know who I was before dinner, but who am I now?'

'Tell me about it.'

'I can't. I ran away. I think I knocked Lord Barmouth down. Then I ran to the station—I knew there was a train. Just by chance I put on the skirt that had my purse in it, or—— No, I'd never have gone back. And I got to London. I went to my flat. At the door I remembered it was let. Then—then, Peggy, I went to Danes Inn.' She looked up at Peggy with a puzzled glance, as though asking why she had gone to Danes Inn. 'But he was out—at least there was no answer—and the porter had followed me and was waiting at the foot of the stairs. So I came down. I told him I was Airey Newton's sister, but he didn't believe me.' She broke into a weak laugh. 'So I came here, and waited till you came. But those men were here,

so I waited till—till I couldn't wait any longer.' She lay back exhausted in her chair. 'May I stay to-night?' she asked.

'It's so lucky Elfreda's away. There's a whole room for you!' said Peggy. She got a low chair and sat down by Trix. But Trix sprang suddenly to her feet in a new spasm of nervous excitement that made her weariness forgotten. Peggy watched her, a little afraid, half-sorry that she had not bidden Tommy Trent to wait outside the baize door.

'Oh, that time at Barslett!' cried Trix Trevalla, flinging out her hands. 'The torture of it! And I told them all lies, nothing but lies! They were turning me into one great lie. I told lies to the man I was going to marry—this very night I told him a lie. And I didn't dare to confess. So I ran away. I ran for my life—literally for my life, I think.'

This sort of thing was quite new to Peggy, as new to her as to the Barmouths, though in a different way.

'Weren't they kind to you?' she asked wonderingly. It was strange that this was the woman who had made the great triumph, whom all the other women were envying.

Trix took no notice of her simple question.

'I'm beaten,' she said. 'It's all too hard for me. I thought I could do it—I can't!' She turned on Peggy almost fiercely. 'I've myself to thank for it. There's hardly anybody I haven't treated badly; there's been nobody I really cared about. Beaufort Chance, Mrs. Bonfill, the Frickers—yes, Mortimer too—they were all to do something for me. Look what they've done! Look where I am now!'

She threw herself into a chair, and sat there silent for a minute. Peggy rose quietly, shut the window, and drew the curtains.

'They all believed in me in their way,' Trix went on, more quietly, more drearily. 'They thought I should do my part of the bargain, that I should play fair. The bargains weren't a good sort, and I didn't even play fair. So here I am!'

Her desolation struck Peggy to the heart, but it seemed too vast for any demonstration of affection or efforts at consolation; Trix would not want to be kissed while she was dissecting her own soul.

'That's what Fricker meant by the letter he wrote me. He's a swindler. So was I. He didn't swindle me till I swindled him. I lied to him just as I lied to Mortimer—just in the same way.'

'Do go to bed, dear. You'll be able to tell me better to-morrow.'

'I know now,' Trix went on, holding her head between her hands, 'I know now why I went to Danes Inn. I remember now. It came into my head in the train—as I stared at an old man who thought I was mad. It was because he made me think I could do all that, and treat people and the world like that.'

'Airey did?'

'Perhaps he didn't mean to, but it sounded like that to me. I had had such a life of it; nobody had ever given me a chance. He seemed to tell me to have my chance, to take my turn. So I did. I didn't care about any of them. I was having my turn, that's all. It's very horrible, very horrible. And after it all here I am! But that's why I went to Danes Inn.' She broke off and burst into a feeble laugh. 'You should have seen Lord Barmouth, with his shawl and his lantern and his spud! I believe I knocked him down.' She sprang up again and listened to the clock that struck two. 'I wonder what Mortimer is doing!' She stood stock-still, a terror on her face. 'Will they come after me?'

'They won't think of coming here,' Peggy assured her soothingly.

'It's all over now, you know, absolutely,' said Trix. 'But I daren't face them. I daren't see any of them. I should like never to see anything of them again. They're things to forget. Oh, my life seems to have been nothing but things to forget! And to-night I remember them all, so

clearly, every bit of them. I wanted something different, and it's turned out just the same.' She came quickly up to Peggy and implored her, 'Will you hide me here for a little while?'

'As long as you like. Nobody will come here.' The contrast between the gay, confident, high-couraged Trix Trevalla she had known and this broken creature seemed terrible to Peggy.

'I came here because——' A sort of puzzle fell upon her again.

'Of course you did. We're friends,' said Peggy, and now she kissed her. All that Trix was saying might be dark and strange, but her coming was natural enough in Peggy's eyes.

'Yes, that's why I came,' cried Trix, eagerly snatching at the word. 'Because we're friends! You're friends, you and all of you. You're not trying to get anything, you'd give anything—you, and Mr. Trent, and Airey Newton.'

Airey's name gave Peggy a little pang. She said nothing, but her smile was sad.

'And at Barslett I thought of you all—most of you yourself. Somehow you seemed to me the only pleasant thing there was in the world; and I was so far—so far away from you.' She lowered her voice suddenly to a cautious whisper. 'I must tell you something, but promise me to repeat it to nobody. Promise me!'

'Of course I promise,' said Peggy readily.

'I think I'm ruined,' whispered Trix. 'I think Fricker has ruined me. That's what I didn't dare tell Mortimer. I had a letter from Fricker, but I've lost it, I think, or left it somewhere. Or did I tear it up? As far as I could understand it, it looked as if he'd ruined me. When I've paid all I have to pay I think I shall have hardly any money at all, Peggy. You promise not to tell?'

Peggy was more in her element now; her smile grew much brighter.

'Yes, I promise, and you needn't bother about that. It

doesn't matter a bit. And, besides, I've got lots of money. Airey's got a heap of money of mine.'

'Airey Newton?' She stood silent a moment, frowning, as though she were thinking of him or of what his name brought into her mind. But in the end she only said again, 'Yes, I think I must be ruined too.'

It was evident that Peggy could comfort her on that score hardly more than with regard to the troubles that were strange and mysterious. Indeed Peggy was almost at her limit of endurance.

'If you're miserable any longer, and don't go quietly to bed, I think I shall begin to cry and never stop,' she declared in serious warning.

'Have I said a great deal?' asked Trix wearily. 'I'm sorry; I had to say it to someone. It was burning me up inside, you know.'

'You will come to bed?' Peggy entreated.

'Yes, I'll come to bed. I've got nothing, you know. I must have left everything there.'

This problem again was familiar; Peggy assured her that there would be no trouble. A rather hysterical smile came on Trix's lips.

'They'll find all my things in the morning,' she said. 'And Lord Barmouth will tell them how I knocked him down! And Mrs. Bonfill! And Lady Barmouth!'

'It would be rather fun to be there,' suggested Peggy, readily advancing to the brink of mirth.

'And Mortimer!'

Peggy looked at her curiously and risked the question:—

'Did you care at all for him?'

'I can't care for anybody—anybody,' moaned Trix despairingly. She stretched out her arms. 'Can you teach me, Peggy?'

'You poor old dear, come to bed,' said Peggy.

Peggy herself was not much for bed that night. After she had seen Trix between the sheets, and dropping off to sleep in exhaustion, she put on a dressing-gown and came

back to her favourite chair. Here she sat herself Turk-wise, and abandoned the remaining hour of darkness to reflection and cigarettes. She was to become, it seemed, a spectator of odd things, a repository of secrets; she was to behold strange scenes in the world's comedy. It was by no seeking of hers; she had but gone about enjoying herself, and all this came to her; she did but give of her abundance of happiness, and they brought to her trouble in exchange. Was that too the way of the world? Peggy did not complain. No consciousness marred her beneficence; she never supposed that she was doing or could do good. And it was all interesting. She pictured Barslett in its consternation, and a delighted triumph rose in her; she would fight Barslett, if need be, for Trix Trevalla. For the present it was enough to laugh at abandoned Barslett, and she paid it that tribute heartily.

Yes, there were her secrets, both guarded by pledges of honour! Trix was ruined, and Airey Newton was—what he must be declared to be. The thought of the two made connection in her mind. Trix had given her the link that held them together; if what Trix had told were true, Airey Newton had much to say to this night's episode, to all that had happened at Barslett and before, to the ruin and despair.

'All that sounds rather absurd,' murmured Peggy critically, 'but I'm beginning to think that that's no reason against things being true.'

Because things all round were rather absurd—Elfreda and Horace Harnack there at Norwich, Airey Newton hugging gold, Barslett aghast, Mortimer Mervyn forsaken, brilliant Trix beaten, battered, ruined, a fugitive seeking a house of refuge—and seeking it with her. Was there no thread to this labyrinth? Peggy might have the clue in her heart; she had it not in her head.

Dawn peeped through the curtains, and she tore the hanging folds away that she might greet its coming and welcome the beauty of it. As she stood looking, her old

confident faith that joy cometh in the morning rose in her. Presently she turned away with a merry laugh, and, shrugging her shoulders at Nature's grandmotherly ways, at last drove herself to bed at hard on five o'clock. There was no sound from Trix Trevalla's room when she listened on the way.

Her night was short; eight o'clock found her in the market, buying flowers, flowers, flowers; the room was to be a garden for Trix to-day, and money flew thousand-winged from Peggy's purse. She had just dealt forth her last half-sovereign when she turned to find Tommy Trent at her elbow; he too was laden with roses.

'Oh!' exclaimed Peggy, rather startled, and blushing a little, looking down, too, at her unceremonious morning attire.

'Ah!' said Tommy, pointing at her flowers and shaking his head.

'Well, you've got some too.'

'I was going to leave them for you—just in acknowledgment of the lobsters. What have you bought those for?'

'They're for her,' said Peggy. 'I shall like to have yours for myself.'

'Nobody ever needed them less, but I'll bring them round,' said he.

They walked together to her door. Then Tommy said:—

'Well, you can tell me?'

'I can tell you part of it—not all,' said Peggy.

'Who is she, then?'

'Nobody else is to know.' She whispered to him: 'Trix Trevalla!'

Tommy considered a moment. Then he remarked:—

'You'll probably find that you've got to send for me.'

Peggy raised her brows and looked at him derisively. He returned her gaze placidly, with a pleasant smile. Peggy laughed gently.

'If Mrs. Trevalla is so foolish, I don't mind,' she said.

Tommy strolled off very happy. 'The thing moves, I think,' he mused as he went his way. For the more love she had for others, the more and the better might she some day give to him. It is a treasure that grows by spending: such was his reflection, and it seems but fair to record it, since so many instances of a different trend of thought have been exhibited.

CHAPTER XV

NOT EVERYBODY'S FOOTBALL

LORD BARMOUTH was incapable of speaking of it—incapable. He said so, and honestly believed himself. Indeed it is possible that under less practised hands he would have revealed nothing. Lady Blixworth, cordially agreeing that the less said the better, extracted a tolerably full account of the whole affair.

'She did, she actually did,' he assured her, as though trying to overcome an inevitable incredulity. 'I was standing in the middle of the path, and she'—he paused, seeking a word—something to convey the monstrous fact.

'Shoved you off it?' suggested Lady Blixworth, in no difficulty for the necessary word.

'She pushed me violently aside. I all but fell!'

'Then she scuttled off?'

This time he accepted the description. 'Exactly what she did—exactly. I can describe it in no other way. She must have been mad!'

'What can have driven her mad at Barslett?' asked his friend innocently.

'Nothing. We were kindness itself. Her troubles were not due to her visit to us. We made her absolutely one of the family.'

'You tried, you mean,' she suggested.

'Precisely. We tried—with what success you see. It is heart-breaking—heart——'

'And what did Mortimer say?'

'I didn't tell him till the next morning. I can't dwell

on the scene. He ran to her room himself; I followed. It was in gross disorder.'

'No!'

'I assure you, yes. There was no letter, no word for him. Presently his mother prevailed on him to withdraw.'

'It must have been a shock.'

'I prefer to leave it undescribed. Nobody could attempt to comfort him but our good Sarah Bonfill.'

'Ah, dearest Sarah has a wonderful way!'

'As the day wore on, she induced him to discuss the Trans-Euphratic Railway scheme, in which he is greatly interested. He will be a long while recovering.'

Repressing her inclination to seize an obvious opening for a flippant question, Lady Blixworth gazed sympathetically at the afflicted father.

'And your poor wife?' she asked in gentle tones.

'A collapse—nothing less than a collapse, Viola. The deception that Mrs. Trevalla practised—well, I won't say a word. I had come to like her, and it is too painful—too painful. But there is no doubt that she wilfully deceived us on at least two occasions. The first we forgave freely and frankly; we treated it as if it had never been. The second time was on that evening itself; she misrepresented the result of certain business matters in which she had engaged——'

'And ran away to avoid being found out?' guessed Lady Blixworth.

'I think—I may say, I hope—that she was for the time not responsible for her actions.'

'Where is she now?'

'I have no information. We don't desire to know. We have done with her.'

'Does Mortimer feel like that too?'

'Don't do him the injustice—the injustice, Viola—of supposing anything else. He knows what is due to himself. Fortunately the acute position of public affairs is a distraction.'

'Do tell him to come here. We shall be so glad to see him, Audrey and I. She admires him so much, you know; and I—well, I've known him since he was a boy. Does Sarah know nothing more about Trix's reasons for behaving in such a fashion?'

'In Sarah's opinion Mrs. Trevalla has ruined herself by speculation.'

Lady Blixworth was startled from artifice by the rapture of finding her suspicions justified.

'Fricker!' she exclaimed triumphantly.

'There is every reason to believe so—every reason.' There was at least one very good one—namely, that Mrs. Bonfill had pieced together Mr. Fricker's letter, read it, and communicated the contents to Lady Barmouth. Lord Barmouth saw no need to be explicit on this point; he had refused to read the letter himself, or to let Mrs. Bonfill speak to him about it. It is, however, difficult for a man not to listen to his wife.

'Well, you never were enthusiastic about the match, were you?'

'She wasn't quite one of us, but I had come to like her.' He paused, and then, after a struggle, broke out candidly, 'I feel sorry for her, Viola.'

'It does you credit,' said Lady Blixworth, and she really thought it did.

'In a sense she is to be pitied. It is inevitable that a man like Mortimer should require much from the woman who is to be his wife. It is inevitable. She couldn't reach his standard.'

'Nor yours.'

'Our standard for him is very high, very high.' He sighed. 'But I'm sorry for her.'

'What does Sarah say?'

Lord Barmouth looked a little puzzled. He leant forward and observed confidentially, 'It seems to me, Viola, that women of high principle occasionally develop a certain severity of judgment—I call it a severity.'

'So do I,' nodded Lady Blixworth heartily.

Barmouth passed rapidly from the dangers of such criticism.

'It is probably essential in the interests of society,' he added, with a return of dignity.

'Oh, probably,' she conceded, with a carelessness appropriate to the subject. 'Do you think there's another man?'

'I beg your pardon, Viola?' He was obviously astonished, and inclined to be offended.

'Any man she liked or had liked, you know?'

'She was engaged to my son.'

That certainly sounded final, but Lady Blixworth was not abashed.

'An engagement is just what brings the idea of the other man back sometimes,' she observed.

'We have no reason to suspect it in this case. I will not suspect it without definite grounds. In spite of everything let us be just.'

Lady Blixworth agreed to be just, with a rather weary air. 'Do give my best love to dear Lady Barmouth, and do send Mortimer to see me,' she implored her distressed visitor, when he took his leave.

The coast was clear. If she knew anything of the heart of man—as she conceived she did—the juncture of affairs was not unfavourable; ill-used lovers may sometimes be induced to seek softer distractions than Trans-Euphratic or other railways. She telegraphed to Audrey Pollington to cut short a visit which she was paying in the country. At any rate Audrey would not have ruined herself nor run away. In a spirit not over-complimentary either to Audrey or to Barslett, Lady Blixworth decided that they would just suit one another.

'The marriage arranged, &c., will not take place.' When a lady disappears by night, and sends no communication save a telegram, giving no address and asking that her luggage may be consigned to Charing Cross station, 'to be called for,' it is surely justifiable to insert that curt intimation of happiness

frustrated or ruin escaped; the doubt in which light to look at it must be excused, since it represents faithfully the state of Mervyn's mind. He still remembered Trix as he had thought her, still had visions of her as what he had meant her to become; with the actual Trix of fact he was naturally in a fury of outraged self-esteem.

'I would have forgiven her,' he told Mrs. Bonfill, not realising at all that this ceremony, or process, was the very thing which Trix had been unable to face. 'In a little while we might have forgotten it, if she had shown proper feeling.'

'She's the greatest disappointment I ever had in my life,' declared Mrs. Bonfill. 'Not excepting even Beaufort Chance! I needn't say that I wash my hands of her, Mortimer.' Mrs. Bonfill was very sore; people would take advantage of Trix's escapade to question the social infallibility of her sponsor.

'We have no alternative,' he agreed gloomily.

'You mustn't think any more about her; you have your career.'

'I hate the gossip,' he broke out fretfully.

'If you say nothing, it will die away. For the moment it is unavoidable—you are so conspicuous.'

'I shall fulfil all my engagements as if nothing had happened.'

'Much the best way,' she agreed, recognising a stolid courage in him which commanded some admiration. He was facing what he hated most in the world—ridicule; he was forced to realise one of the things that a man least likes to realise—that he has failed to manage a woman whom he has undertaken to manage. No eccentricities of sin or folly in her, no repeated failures to find anything amiss in himself, can take away the sting.

'I can't blame myself,' he said more than once to Mrs. Bonfill; but the conviction of his blamelessness yielded no comfort.

She understood his feeling, and argued against it; but it remained with him still, in spite of all she could say. He

had always been satisfied with himself; he was very ill-satisfied now. Some malicious spirit in himself seemed to join in the chorus of ill-natured laughter from outside which his pride and sensitiveness conjured to his ears. Beaufort Chance had walked the streets once in fear of the whispers of passers-by saying that he had been proved a rogue. Mervyn walked them, and sat in his place in the House, imagining that the whispers said that he had been made a fool. But he faced all. Barslett bred courage, if not brilliancy; he faced even Beaufort Chance, who sat below the gangway, and screwed round on him a vicious smile the first time he appeared after the announcement.

On the whole he behaved well, but he had not even that glimmer of pity for Trix which had shone through his father's horrified pompousness. The movements of her mind remained an utter blank to him; why she had lied, an unsolved mystery. Amidst all his humiliation and his anger, he thanked heaven that such a woman would never now be mistress of Barslett; the affair constituted a terrible warning against experiments in marriage. If the question arose again —and in view of Barslett it must—he would follow the beaten track. In the bottom of his heart—though he confessed it to nobody, no, not to his parents nor to Mrs. Bonfill —he had something of the feeling of an ordinarily sober and strait-laced young man who has been beguiled into 'making a night of it' with rowdy companions, and in the morning hours undergoes the consequences of his unwonted outbreak: his head aches, he is exposed to irreverent comment, he is heartily determined to forswear such courses. Mervyn did not dream of seeking Trix, or of offering an amnesty. To his mind there was no alternative; he washed his hands of her, like Mrs. Bonfill.

Society took its cue from these authoritative examples, and was rather in a hurry to declare its attitude. It shows in such cases something of the timidity and prudery of people who are themselves not entirely proof against criticism, and are consequently much afraid of the *noscitur a sociis* test

being applied to them. Even in moral matters it displays this readiness to take alarm, this anxiety to vindicate itself; much more so, of course, in the case of conduct which it terms, with vague but unmeasured reprobation, 'impossible.' Trix's behaviour had been 'impossible' in the highest degree, and there could be but one sentence. Yet, though society was eager to dissociate itself from such proceedings, it was not eager to stop talking about them; its curiosity and its desire to learn the whole truth were insatiable. Trix was banned; her particular friends became very popular. Lady Blixworth held *levées* of women who wanted to know. Peggy Ryle's appearances were greeted with enthusiasm. Where was Mrs. Trevalla? How was Mrs. Trevalla? Who (this was an after-thought, coming very late in the day, but demanded by the facts of the case) was Mrs. Trevalla after all? And, of course, the truth had yet to be told? Society held the cheerful conviction that it by no means knew the worst.

Any knowledge Lady Blixworth had, she professed to be at the disposal of her callers; she chose to give it in a form most calculated to puzzle and least likely to satisfy. 'There was a difference, but not amounting to a quarrel.' 'So far as we know, she has not left London.' 'She was certainly alone when she started from Barslett.' Utterances like these wasted the time of the inquirers and beguiled Lady Blixworth's. 'I'm going to stay with them soon,' she would add, 'but probably anything I may hear will be in confidence.' Such a remark as that was actively annoying. 'Oh, Audrey goes with me, yes,' might be a starting-point for conjecture as to the future, but threw no light on the elusive past. More than one lady was heard to declare that she considered Lady Blixworth an exasperating woman.

Peggy's serene silence served as well as these ingenious speeches. With an audacious truthfulness, which only her popularity with men made it safe to employ, she told the affronted world that she knew everything, but could say nothing. An assertion usually considered to be but a transparent and impudent mask of ignorance compelled unwilling

belief when it came from her lips; but surely she could not persist in such an attitude? It cut at the roots of social intercourse. Peggy was incessantly abused and incessantly invited. She had frocks now to respond to every call, and at every call she came. She went even to houses which she had shown no anxiety to frequent before, and which seemed to offer the reward neither of pleasure nor of prestige for going.

'That child is up to something,' opined Lady Blixworth, after a week or two of this; and one day, at her own house, she kept Peggy back and took her firmly by the shoulders.

'What is it you want?' she asked squarely. 'Why have you been going to the Moresby-Jenkinses' and the Eli-Simpkinsons', and places of that sort?'

Peggy looked at her with a shrewd kindness, weighing the advantages of still more candour.

'I want to meet Mr. Fricker,' she confessed at last.

'That means you're in communication with Trix?' An inspiration came upon her. 'Heavens, I believe she's living with you!'

'Yes, she is. She said I might tell you if I liked, though she doesn't want it generally known. But can you help me to meet Mr. Fricker?'

'Are you Trix's ambassador?'

'No, no. She knows nothing about it. She'd be furious.'

Lady Blixworth released her manual hold of her prisoner and sat down, but she kept a detaining eye on her.

'Are you going to throw yourself at Fricker's feet, and ask him to give Trix's money back?'

'Do you know about——?'

'Yes, Lord Barmouth told me; and very much I've enjoyed keeping it to myself. I can feel for Trix; but if you want a lesson, my dear, it's this—the world isn't everybody's football. You won't do any good by clasping Fricker's knees, however pretty you may look.'

'Haven't the least intention of it,' said Peggy coolly. 'I

shall go purely on a business footing.' She paused a minute. 'Trix sent you her love, and would like to see you in a little while.'

'I'll write to her from Barslett.' Lady Blixworth smiled reflectively.

'And about Mr. Fricker?'

'It's a business matter—ask him for an appointment.'

'I never thought of that,' said Peggy, ignoring the irony. 'That's the simplest thing, isn't it?'

'Really I believe, the way you'll do it, it'll be the best. And you might try the knees, perhaps, after all. He's got a heart, I suppose, and an ugly wife, I know. So he must be accessible.'

'You're quite wrong in that idea,' persisted Peggy.

'Of course you could get a card for something where he'd be easily enough, but——'

'The appointment for me! Thanks so much, Lady Blixworth. Without your advice I should have been afraid.'

'Give Trix my love, and tell her I think she deserves it all.'

'You don't know what a state she's in,' urged Peggy reproachfully.

'A thoroughly unscrupulous woman—and, bad as times are, I'd have given a hundred pounds to see her shove Lord Barmouth out of the way and skedaddle down that road.'

'You'd be nice to her, but everybody else is horrid.'

'She deserves it all,' was Lady Blixworth's inexorable verdict.

Peggy looked at her with meditative eyes.

'Her obvious duty was to marry him, and please herself afterwards,' Lady Blixworth explained. 'We must have our rules kept, Peggy, else where should we be? And because we were all furious with him for marrying her, we're all the more furious with her now for throwing him over. Nothing is more offensive than to see other people despise what you'd give your eyes to have.'

'She didn't despise it. She's very unhappy at not having it.'

'At not having it for nothing, I suppose? I've no patience with her.'

'Yes, you have—and lots of understanding. And you're rather fond of her too. Well, I shall go and see Mr. Fricker.'

Peggy's doubts as to how far Lady Blixworth revealed her own views about Trix Trevalla may be shared, but it cannot be questioned that she expressed those of the world, which does not like being made a football of unless by the very great or (perhaps) the very rich. The verdict came in the same tones from all quarters. Lord Glentorly gave it to Mrs. Bonfill when he said, 'She was a pirate craft; it's a good thing she's at the bottom of the sea.' Sir Stapleton Stapleton-Staines ventured to suggest it to Lord Barmouth himself by quoting, with delicate reticence, half of that proverb of which he had before approved. Fricker did not put it into words, but he listened smiling while his wife and daughter put it into a great many—which were very forcible and did not lack the directness of popular speech. All the people whom Trix had sought, in one way or another, to use for her own purposes pointed to her fall as a proof, first, of her wickedness, and, secondly, of their own superiority to any such menial function. In face of such an obvious moral it seems enough to remain approvingly silent; to elaborate it is but to weaken the force of its simple majesty.

And the sinner herself? She sat in Airey Newton's room in Danes Inn and owned that the world was right. She was no more the draggled hysterical woman who had sought refuge with Peggy Ryle. Her boxes had been called for at Charing Cross; her nerves were better under control. She was chaffing Airey Newton, telling him what a failure her sally into society had proved, declaring that on the strength of his advice at Paris she held him responsible for it all.

'You gave me a most selfish gospel,' she laughed. 'I acted on it, and here I am, back on your hands, Mr. Newton.'

He was puzzled by her, for he could not help guessing that her fall had been severe. Perfect as her self-control now was, the struggle had left its mark on her face; her gay manner did not hide the serious truth which lay behind.

'Oh, it's no use beating about the bush,' she declared, laughing. 'I've played my game, and I've lost it. What are you going to do with me?'

'Well, I suppose life isn't altogether at an end?' he suggested.

'We'll hope not,' smiled Trix; but her voice was not hopeful.

'You were engaged, and you're not. It seems to amount to that.'

'That's putting it very baldly. A little bit more, perhaps.'

How much more she did not tell him. She said nothing of Fricker, nothing of ruin; and no rumours had reached Danes Inn. He saw that her vanity was wounded, he guessed that perhaps her affections might be; but he treated her still as the well-off fashionable woman who for a whim came to visit his poor lodgings, just as she still treated him as the poverty-stricken man who might advise others well or ill, but anyhow made little enough out of the world for himself.

'Well, you seem quite happy without these vanities,' she said. 'Why shouldn't I be?' She leant back and seemed to look at him with a grateful sense of peace and quiet. 'And you don't abuse me! You must know I've been very bad, but you greet me like a friend.'

'Your badness is nothing to me, if you have been bad.'

'Is that indifference—or fidelity?' she asked, lightly still, but with a rather anxious expression in her eyes.

For a moment he was silent, staring out of his big window into the big window opposite. In the end he did not answer her question, but put one in his turn:—

'So you hold me responsible?'

There must have been something more than raillery in her original charge, for when he put his question gravely she answered it in a like way.

'You touched some impulse in me that hadn't been touched before. Of course you didn't mean to do it. You didn't know the sort of person you were talking to. But I thought over what you said, and it chimed in with something in me. So I went and—and had my fling.'

'Ah!' he murmured vaguely, but he turned now and looked at her.

She had meant to give him no confidence, but he drew it from her.

'I've been very unhappy,' she confessed. 'I was very unhappy a good deal of the time, even when I was prosperous. And I've—I've told a lot of lies.'

The blunt statement wrung a passing smile from him.

'And if I'd gone on I must have told many more.'

'My responsibility is evidently heavy.' He paused, and then added, 'There are a good many things that make one lie.'

'Not in Danes Inn?' She laughed a little.

'Yes, even in Danes Inn,' said he, frowning.

'I don't think so, and I'm glad to be here,' she said. 'And some day, when I've more courage, I'll make a full confession and ask you to be friends still. I often thought about you and Peggy and the rest.'

He had begun to smoke, and did not look at her again till the long silence that followed her last words caught his attention. When he turned, she sat looking straight in front of her; he saw that her eyes were full of tears. He put down his pipe and came slowly over to her.

'It's been a bit worse than you've told me, Mrs. Trevalla?' he suggested.

'Yes, a little bit,' she owned. 'And—and I'm not cured yet. I still want to go back. There, I tell you that! I haven't told even Peggy. I've told her all my sins, but I've not told her that I'm impenitent. I should like to try again. What else is there for me to try for? You have your work; what have I? I can't get my thoughts away from it all.'

She regarded him with a piteous appeal as she confessed that she was not yet chastened.

'You can go back and have another shot,' he said slowly.

Trix would not tell him why that was impossible.

'I'm afraid the door's shut in my face,' was as definite as she could bring herself to be.

'Well, we shall have the benefit, perhaps.'

'If I told you all about it, I don't think you'd want me here.'

'If we all knew all about one another, should we ever pay visits?'

'Never, I suppose. Or face it out and live together always! But, seriously, I should be afraid to tell you.'

'Don't idealise me.'

The words were curt, the tone hard; there was no appearance of joking about him. There was a dreary disheartened sadness on his face, as of a man who struggled always and struggled in vain, who was suffering some defeat that shamed him. He had come near to her; she reached out her hand and touched his.

'Don't look like that,' she begged. 'I don't know why it is, and you make me more unhappy.'

He turned a sudden glance on her; their eyes met full for an instant; then both turned away. But the look that passed between them had held something new; it made a difference to them; it seemed in some sort to change the feeling of the dingy room. Their eyes had spoken of a possibility which had suddenly come into the minds of both and had surprised the chance of expression before they could hinder it. Henceforward it must at least be common ground with them that the unhappiness of each was a matter of deep concern to the other. But both crushed down the impulse and the longing to which that knowledge seemed naturally to give birth. Trix was not penitent; Airey's battle still ended in defeat. Their pretence was against them. She was of the rich. How could he bear to change his life for hers? She looked round the dingy room. Was this the existence to which she must come, a woman ruined, and content with these four walls? They were not

boy and girl, that the mere thought of love could in a moment sweep all obstacles away. Each felt chains whereof the other knew nothing. It was not hope that filled them, but rather the forlorn sense of loss—that for them, as they were, such a thing could not be; and they were ashamed to own that the idea of it had been interchanged between them.

Trix ended the constrained silence that had followed on the speech of eyes.

'Well, we must take the world as we find it,' she said with a little sigh. 'At least I've tried to make it what I wanted, and, as you see, without success.' She rose to go, but rose reluctantly.

'Is it ourselves or the world?' he asked.

'We're the world, I suppose, like other people, aren't we? I don't feel too good to belong to it!'

'If we're a bit of it, we ought to have more to say to it,' he suggested, smiling again.

Trix shook her head.

'It's too big,' she objected sorrowfully. 'Big and hard, and, I believe, most horribly just.'

Airey stroked his beard in meditation over this.

'I'm inclined to think it is rather just. But I'll be hanged if there's an iota of generosity about it!' said he.

She held out her hand in farewell, and could not help meeting his eyes once again; those deep-set, tired, kindly eyes had a new attraction for her since her wanderings and adventures; they had the strong appeal of offering and of asking help all in the same look. She could not prevent herself from saying:—

'May I come again?'

'You must come,' said Airey Newton in a low voice.

He was left resolved that she of all the world should never know his secret. She went back saying that of all the world he at least should never learn how sore a fool she had been. Because of that glance between them these purposes were immutable in their minds.

CHAPTER XVI.

MORAL LESSONS.

Mrs. Bonfill sore at the damage to her infallibility; Barmouth still feeling that rude and sacrilegious thrust at ennobled ribs; Lady Barmouth unable to look her neighbours in the face; Mervyn fearing the whispers and the titters; Lady Blixworth again wearily donning her armour, betaking herself to Barslett, goading Audrey Pollington into making herself attractive; the Glentorlys and a score more of exalted families feeling that they had been sadly 'let in,' treacherously beguiled into petting and patronising an impossible person; Airey Newton oppressed with scorn of himself, yet bound in his chains; Peggy persuaded that something must be done, and shaken out of her usual happiness by the difficulty of doing it—all these people, and no doubt more besides, proved that if the world is not a football for every wanton toe, neither is it an immovable unimpressionable mass, on which individual effort and the vagaries of this man or that make absolutely no impression. Trix's raid had met with defeat, but it had left its effect on many lives, its marks in many quarters. A sense of this joined with the recognition of her own present wretched state to create in Trix the feelings with which she regarded her past proceedings and their outcome. So many people must have grudges against her; if she was not penitent she was frightened; her instinct was to hide, however much she might still hanker after the glories of conspicuous station. Of Airey's disturbance and of Peggy's fretting, indeed, she had only a vague inkling; the world she had left was the vivid thing to

her; it seemed to ring with her iniquities as her guilty ears listened from the seclusion of Harriet Street, Covent Garden. She knew it called her impossible; she could not have resented Lord Glentorly's 'pirate craft.'

Not even on Mervyn himself had she been so great an influence as on Beaufort Chance, and, great as the influence was, Beaufort greatly, though not unnaturally, exaggerated it. He set down to her account all the guilt of those practices for which he had suffered and of which Fricker was in reality the chief inspirer; at any rate, if she had not counselled them, she had impelled him to them and had then turned round and refused him the reward for whose sake he had sinned. If he ranked now rather with Fricker than with Mervyn or Constantine Blair, or the men of that sort who had been his colleagues and his equals, the heaviest of the blame rested on Trix. If the meshes of the Fricker net enveloped him more closely day by day, hers was the fault. Countenanced by an element of truth, carried the whole way by resentment, by jealousy, and by the impulse to acquit himself at another's expense, he would have rejoiced to make Trix his scapegoat and to lay on her the burden of his sins. Though she could not bear his punishment, he welcomed her as his partner in misfortune. He longed to see her in her humiliation, and sought a way. When he asked himself what he meant to say to her he could not answer; his impulse was to see her in the dust.

The Frickers often talked of Trix—Fricker with the quiet smile of a man who has done what he had to do and done it well; Mrs. Fricker with heavy self-complacent malevolence; Connie with a lighter yet still malicious raillery. An instinct in Chance made him take small part in these discussions and display some indifference towards them; but soon he gleaned what he wanted from them. Fricker had found out where Trix was; he had received a brief note from her, asking to be informed of the full extent of her speculative liabilities. He described with amusement the lucid explanation which he had sent.

'When she's paid that, and her other debts—which must be pretty heavy—there won't be much left, I fancy,' he reflected.

'Where is she?' asked Connie, in passing curiosity.

'I forget. Oh, here's the letter. Thirty-four Harriet Street, Covent Garden. Hardly sounds princely, does it, Connie?'

They all laughed, and Beaufort Chance with them. But he hoarded up the address in his memory. The next moment, by an impulse to conceal his thoughts, he stole an affectionate glance at Connie and received her sly return of it. He knew that, whatever feeling took him to Trix Trevalla's, his visit would not win approval from Connie Fricker.

On the following morning Mr. Fricker saw that address at the top of another note, whose author introduced herself as a great friend of Mrs. Trevalla. Smiling with increased amusement, he gave her what she asked—an appointment for the following afternoon. It would be Saturday, and Fricker bade her come to his house, not to his office. He had heard Connie speak of her with some envy, and saw no reason why the two girls should not become acquainted. The object of the visit was, he supposed, to make an appeal on Trix Trevalla's behalf. Experience taught him that women attached an extraordinary efficacy to a personal interview—extraordinary, that is, where the other party to the interview was not a fool. His anticipation of the meeting did not differ much from Lady Blixworth's satirical suggestion of its course.

When Peggy came at the appointed hour (she was so far human, Mr. Fricker's suspicions so far justified, that she had taken much pains with her toilet) she was ushered into the drawing-room, not the study, and was met by Connie with profuse apologies. A gentleman had called on papa most unexpectedly; papa had to see the gentleman because the gentleman was leaving for Constantinople the next day. It was something about the Trans-Euphratic Railway, or something tiresome. Would Miss Ryle mind waiting half an hour

and having a cup of tea? Mamma would be so sorry to miss her, but it was Lady Rattledowney's day, and Lady Rattledowney was lost without mamma. Did Miss Ryle know the Rattledowneys? Such dear people the Rattledowneys were! They were also, it may be observed, extremely impecunious.

Thus vivaciously inaugurated, the conversation prospered. Peggy, sorely afraid of giggling, studied her companion with an amusement sternly repressed, and an interest the greater for being coupled with unhesitating condemnation. Connie ranged over the upper half of the Fricker acquaintance; she had been warned to avoid mention of Trix Trevalla, but she made haste to discover any other common friends: there were the Eli-Simpkinsons and the Moresby-Jenkinses, of course; a few more also whom Peggy knew. Mrs. Bonfill figured on Connie's list, though not, she admitted, of their intimate circle. ('She has so much to do, poor Mrs. Bonfill, one can never find her!' regretted Connie.) Over Lady Blixworth, whose name Peggy introduced, she rather shied.

'Mamma doesn't think her very good form,' she said primly.

Rushing for any remark to avert the threatened laugh, Peggy made boldly for Beaufort Chance.

'Oh, yes, he's a very particular friend of ours. We think him delightful. So clever too! He's always in and out of the house, Miss Ryle.' She blushed a little, and met Peggy's look with a conscious smile.

Peggy smiled too, and followed the next direction taken by Miss Connie's handsome eyes.

'I see you've got his photograph on the table.'

'Yes. Mamma lets me have that for my particular table.'

Evidently Peggy was to understand that her companion had a property in Beaufort Chance; whether the intimation was for Peggy's own benefit or for transmission to another was not clear. It was possibly no more than an ebullition of vanity—but Peggy did not believe that.

'We ride together in the morning sometimes, and that always makes people such friends. No stiffness, you know.'

Peggy, wondering when and where any stiffness would intrude into Connie's friendship, agreed that riding was an admirable path to intimacy.

'And then he's so much connected in business with papa; that naturally brings him here a lot.'

'I don't suppose he minds,' suggested Peggy, playing the game.

'He says he doesn't,' laughed Connie, poking out her foot and regarding it with coy intensity, as she had seen ladies do on the stage when the topic of their affections happened to be touched upon.

Understanding the accepted significance, if not the inherent propriety, of the attitude, Peggy ventured on a nod which intimated her appreciation of the position.

'Oh, it's all nonsense anyhow, isn't it, Miss Ryle? What I say is, it's just a bit of fun.' In this declaration Connie did less than justice to herself. It was that, but it was something much more.

Peggy was vastly amused, and saw no reason to be more delicate or reticent than the lady principally concerned.

'May we congratulate you yet?'

'Gracious, no, Miss Ryle! How you do get on!'

At this Peggy saw fair excuse for laughter, and made up her arrears heartily. Connie was not at all displeased. Peggy 'got on' further, chaffing Connie on her conquest and professing all proper admiration for the victim.

'Mind you don't say anything to mamma,' Connie cautioned her. 'It's all a dead secret.'

'I'm very good at secrets,' Peggy assured her.

'He gave me this,' murmured Connie, displaying a bangle.

'How perfectly sweet!' cried Peggy.

'It is rather nice, isn't it? I love diamonds and pearls. Don't you, Miss Ryle? Lady Rattledowney admired it very much.'

'Did you tell her where it came from?'

'No—and mamma thinks I bought it!'

Peggy had arrived at the conclusion that this guilelessness was overdone; she adopted, without serious doubt, the theory of transmission. Nothing was to be repeated to mamma, but as much as she chose might find its way to Trix Trevalla. The information was meant to add a drop of bitterness to that sinner's cup. Peggy was willing to take it on this understanding—and to deal with it as might chance to be convenient.

'I hope you haven't found me very dull, Miss Ryle?'

'No!' cried Peggy, with obvious sincerity. Connie had been several things which Peggy subsequently detailed, but she had not been tiresome.

The interview with Mr. Fricker was in a different key, the only likeness being that the transmission theory still seemed applicable, and indeed inevitable here and there. The giggles and the coyness were gone, and with them the calculated guilelessness; the vulgarity was almost gone. Fricker was not a gentleman, but, thanks to his quietness and freedom from affectation, it was often possible to forget the fact. He had a dry humour, she soon found, and it was stirred by the contrast between his visitor's utter ignorance of business and her resolutely business-like manner. It was evident that she did not intend to clasp his knees.

'I see you've taken my measure, Miss Ryle,' he remarked. 'Mrs. Trevalla has shown you my letter, you tell me, and you have come to make me a proposition?'

'It seems from the letter that they can go on making her pay money?'

'Precisely—at stated intervals and of definite amounts. Three several amounts of one thousand pounds at intervals of not less than two months—the first being due immediately, and the others sure to come later.'

'Yes, I think I understand that.'

'I endeavour to express myself clearly, Miss Ryle.'

Peggy ignored a profane gleam of amusement in his eye.

'I suppose it's no good talking about how she came to buy such curious shares,' began Peggy.

'I think you'll have gathered from Mrs. Trevalla that such a discussion would not be fruitful,' interposed Fricker.

'Have you got to pay too?'

'That question is, pardon me, worse than fruitless; it's irrelevant.'

'She can't pay that money and what she owes besides unless she has time given her. And, even if she has, she'll worry herself to death, waiting and watching for the—for the——'

'Calls,' he suggested. 'That's the legal term.'

'Oh, yes. The calls.'

'I am not the company; I am not her creditors. I can't give Mrs. Trevalla time.'

'You wouldn't if you could!' Peggy blazed out.

'Irrelevant again,' he murmured, gently shaking his head.

'I didn't come here to beg,' Peggy explained. 'But I've a sort of idea that, if you had the shares instead of Trix, you could get out of it cheaper somehow. I mean, you could make some arrangement with the company, or get rid of the shares, or something. Anyhow I believe you could manage to pay less than she'll have to.'

'It's possible you're flattering me there.'

'You'd try?'

'You may, I think, give me the credit of supposing I should try,' said Fricker, smiling again.

'She'll have to pay, or—or try to pay——'

'She'll be liable to pay——'

'Yes, liable to pay three thousand pounds altogether?' He nodded. 'What are the shares worth?'

'Three thousand pounds less than nothing, Miss Ryle.'

His terrible coolness appalled Peggy. She could not resist a glance of horror, but she held herself in hand.

'Then, if you took them, the most you'd lose would be three thousand pounds, and you'd have a very good chance of losing less?'

'I don't know about a good chance. Some chance, shall we say?' He was more than tolerant; he was interested in Peggy's development of her idea.

Peggy leant her elbows on the writing-table between them.

'I want her to be rid of the whole thing—to think it never happened. I want you to take those shares from her: tell her that they've become of value, or that you made a mistake, or anything you like of that sort, and that you'll relieve her of them. If you did that, how much money should you want?'

'You wish this done out of ki· lness? To take a weight off Mrs. Trevalla's mind?'

'Yes, to take a weight off her mind. It's funny, but she frets more over having bungled her money affairs and having been made—having been silly, you know—than over anything else. She's very proud, you see.'

Fricker's smile broadened. 'I can quite believe she's proud,' he remarked.

'Of course she knows nothing about my being here. It's my own idea. You see what I want, don't you?'

'As a business transaction, I confess I don't quite see it. If you appeal to my good-nature, and ask me to make sacrifices for Mrs. Trevalla——'

'No. I don't expect you to lose by it.'

Fricker saw the look that she could not keep out of her eyes. He smiled fixedly at her.

'But I thought that, if you could satisfy them—or get off somehow—for—well, one thousand pounds or—or at most one thousand five hundred pounds' (Peggy was very agitated over her amounts), 'that—that I and some other friends could manage that, and then—why, we'd tell her it was all right!' A hint of triumph broke through her nervousness as she declared her scheme. 'I can't be absolutely sure of the money except my own, but I believe I could get it.' She worked up to a climax. 'I can give you five hundred pounds now—in notes, if you like,' she said, producing a little leather bag of a purse.

Fricker gave a short dry laugh; the whole episode amused him very much, and Peggy's appearance also gratified his taste. She unfastened the bag, and he heard her fingers crackle the notes, as she sat with her eyes fixed on his; appeal had been banished from Peggy's words, it spoke in her eyes in spite of herself.

'Mrs. Trevalla has perhaps told you something of her relations with me?' asked Fricker, clasping his long spare hands on the table.

'I don't defend her: but you don't fight with women, Mr. Fricker?'

'There are no women in business matters, Miss Ryle.'

'Or with people who are down?'

'Not fight, no. I keep my foot on them.'

He took up a half-smoked cigar and relit it.

'I'm not a Shylock,' he resumed with a smile. 'Shylock was a sentimentalist. I'd have taken that last offer—a high one, if I remember—and given up my pound of flesh. But you expect me to do it for much less than market value. I like my pound of flesh, and I want something above market value for it, Miss Ryle. I've taught Mrs. Trevalla her little lesson. Perhaps there's no need to rub it in any more. You want me to make her think that she can get out of Glowing Stars without further loss?'

'Yes.'

'And you want me to take the risk on myself? The loss may run to three thousand pounds, though, as you say, a lucky chance might enable me to reduce it.' His fertile mind had inklings of a scheme already, though in the vaguest outline.

'Yes,' said Peggy again, not trusting herself to say more.

'Very well; now we understand.' He leant right over towards her. 'I think you're foolish,' he told her, 'you and the other friends. The woman deserves all she's got; she didn't play fair with me. I haven't a spark of sympathy for her. If I followed my feelings, I should show you the door. But I don't follow my feelings when I see a fair profit

in the other direction. If Mrs. Trevalla had acted on that rule she wouldn't be where she is.' He thrust his chair back suddenly and rose to his feet. 'I'll do what you wish, and back up the story you mean to tell her, if you'll come again and bring that pretty little bag with you, and take out of it and lay on this table——' He paused in wilful malice, tormenting Peggy and watching her parted lips and eager eyes. 'And lay on the table,' he ended slowly, 'four thousand pounds.'

'Four——!' gasped Peggy, and could get no further.

'Three to cover risk, one as a solatium for the wound Mrs. Trevalla has dealt to my pride.' His irony was unwontedly savage as he snarled out his gibe.

Peggy's face suddenly grew flushed and her eyes dim. She looked at him, and knew there was no mercy. He did not spare her his gaze, but when she conquered her dismay and sat fronting him with firm lips again he smiled a grim approval. He liked pluck, and when he had hit his hardest he liked best to see the blow taken well. He became his old self-controlled calm self again.

Peggy shut her bag with a click and rose in her turn. Her first words surprised Mr. Fricker.

'That's a bargain, is it?' she asked.

'A bargain, certainly,' he said.

'Then will you put it in writing, please?' She pointed at the table with a peremptory air.

Infinitely amused again, Fricker sat down and embodied his undertaking in a letter, ceremoniously addressed to Miss Ryle, expressed and signed in the name of his firm; he blotted the letter and gave it to her in an open envelope.

'It's better not to trust to memory, however great confidence we may have in one another, isn't it?' said he.

'Much,' agreed Peggy drily. 'I don't suppose I can get all that money, but I'm going to try,' she announced.

'I daresay there are people who would do a great deal for you,' he suggested in sly banter.

Peggy flushed again. 'I shouldn't ask anyone like that.

I couldn't.' She broke off, indignant with herself; she had taken almost a confidential tone. 'It's not your concern where or how I get it.'

'You express the view I've always taken most exactly, Miss Ryle.'

He was openly deriding her, but she hardly hated him now. He was too strange to hate, she was coming to think. She smiled at him as she asked a question:—

'Does money always make people what you are?'

'Money?' Fricker stood with his hands in his pockets, seeming a little puzzled.

'I mean, always bothering with it and thinking a lot of it, you know.'

'Oh, no! If it did, all men of business would be good men of business, and luckily there are plenty of bad.'

'I see,' said Peggy. 'Well, I'll come back if I get the money, Mr. Fricker.'

'I'm glad Connie gave you some tea.'

'We had a very nice talk, thank you.'

'I won't ask you to remember me to Mrs. Trevalla.'

'She's not to know I've seen you. You've put that in the letter?'

'Bless my soul, I'd forgotten! How valuable that written record is! Yes, you'll find it there all right. The transaction is to be absolutely confidential so far as Mrs. Trevalla is concerned.'

He escorted her to the door. As they passed through the hall, Connie's voice came from upstairs:—

'Won't Miss Ryle take a glass of wine before she goes, papa?'

Fricker looked at Peggy with a smile.

'I don't drink wine,' said Peggy, rather severely.

'Of course not—between meals. Connie's so hospitable, though. Well, I hope to see you again.'

'I really don't believe you do,' said Peggy. 'You love money, but——'

'I love a moral lesson more? Possibly, Miss Ryle; but

I at least keep my bargains. You can rely on my word if—if you come again, you know.'

Peggy's hansom was at the door, and he helped her in. She got into the corner of it, nodded to him, and then sank her face far into the fluffy recesses of a big white feather boa. All below her nose was hidden; her eyes gleamed out fixed and sad; her hands clutched the little bag very tightly. She had so hoped to bring it back empty; she had so hoped to have a possible though difficult task set her. Now she could hear and think of nothing but those terrible figures set out in Fricker's relentless tones—'Four thousand pounds!'

Fricker turned back into his house, smiling in ridicule touched with admiration. It was all very absurd, but she was a girl of grit. 'Straight too,' he decided approvingly.

Connie ran downstairs to meet him.

'Oh, what did she want? I've been sitting in the drawing-room just devoured by curiosity! Do tell me about it, papa!'

'Not a word. It's business,' he said curtly, but not unkindly. 'Inquisitiveness is an old failing of yours. Ah!'

His exclamation was called forth by an apparently slight cause. Connie wore a white frock; to the knees of it adhered a long strip of fawn-coloured wool.

'You were sitting in the drawing-room devoured by curiosity?' he asked reflectively.

'Just devoured, papa,' repeated Connie gaily.

Mr. Fricker took hold of her ear lightly and began to walk her towards his study.

'Odd!' he said gently. 'Because the drawing-room's upholstered in red, isn't it?'

'Well, of course.' Connie laughed rather uneasily.

'And, so far as I know, the only fawn-coloured wool mat in the house is just outside my study door.'

'What do you mean, papa?' Connie was startled, and tried to jump away; Mr. Fricker's firm hold on her ear made it plain that she would succeed only at an impossible sacrifice.

'And that's the precise colour of that piece of wool clinging to your frock. Look!' They were on the mat now; the study door was open, and there was ample light for Connie to make the suggested comparison. 'Look!' urged Fricker, smiling and pinching his daughter's ear with increasing force. 'Look, Connie, look!'

'Papa! Oh, you're hurting me!'

'Dear me, I'm sorry,' said Fricker. 'But the thought of people listening outside my door made me forget what I was doing.' It seemed to have the same effect again, for Connie writhed. 'How difficult it is to get straightforward dealing!' reflected Fricker sadly. 'My dear Connie, if you happen to have caught any of the conversation, you will know that Mrs. Trevalla has learnt the advantage of straightforward dealing.'

Connie had nothing to say; she began to cry rather noisily. Fricker involuntarily thought of a girl he had seen that day who would neither have listened nor cried.

'Run away,' he said, releasing her; his tone was kind, but a trifle contemptuous. 'You'd better keep my secrets if I'm to keep yours, you know.'

Connie went off, heaving sobs and rubbing her assaulted ear. She was glad to escape so cheaply, and the sobs stopped when she got round the first corner.

'Connie's a good girl,' said Fricker, addressing the study walls in a thoughtful soliloquy. 'Yes, she's a good girl. But there's a difference. Yes, there is a difference.' He shrugged his shoulders, lit a fresh cigar, and sat down at his writing-table. 'It doesn't matter whether Connie knows or not,' he reflected, 'but we must have moral lessons, you know. That's what pretty Miss Ryle had to understand—and Mrs. Trevalla, and now Connie. It'll do all of 'em good.'

Then he looked up the position of the Glowing Star, and thought that an amalgamation might possibly be worked and things put in a little better trim. But it would be troublesome, and—he preferred the moral lesson after all.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PERJURER

PEGGY'S appointment had not been a secret in the Fricker household, though its precise object was not known; it had been laughed and joked over in the presence of the family friend, Beaufort Chance. He had joined in the mirth, and made a mental note of the time appointed—just as he had of Trix Trevalla's address in Harriet Street. Hence it was that he caused himself to be driven to the address a little while after Peggy had started on her way to Fricker's. The woman who answered his ring said that Mrs. Trevalla was seeing nobody; her scruples were banished by his confident assurance that he was an old friend, and by five shillings which he slipped into her hand. He did not scrutinise his impulse to see Trix; it was rather blind, but it was overpowering. An idea had taken hold of him which he hid carefully in his heart, hid from the Frickers above all—and tried, perhaps, to hide from himself too; for it was dangerous.

Trix's nerves had not recovered completely; they were not tuned to meet sudden encounters. She gave a startled cry as the door was opened hastily and as hastily closed, and he was left alone with her. She was pale and looked weary about the eyes, but she looked beautiful too, softened by her troubles and endowed with the attraction of a new timidity; he marked it in her as useful to his purposes.

'You? What have you come for?' she cried, not rising nor offering him her hand.

He set down his hat and pulled off his gloves deliberately. He knew they were alone in the lodgings; she

was at his mercy. That was the first thing he had aimed at, and it was his.

'Your friends naturally want to see how you are getting on,' he said, with a laugh. 'They've been hearing so much about you.'

Trix tried to compose herself to a quiet contempt, but the nerves were wrong and she was frightened.

'Well, things have turned out funnily, haven't they? Not quite what they looked like being when we met last, at Viola Blixworth's! You were hardly the stuff to fight Fricker, were you? Or me either—though you thought you could manage me comfortably.'

His words were brutal enough; his look surpassed them. Trix shrank back in her chair.

'I don't want to talk to you at all,' she protested helplessly.

'Ah, it's always had to be just what you wanted, hasn't it? Never mind anybody else! But haven't you learnt that that doesn't exactly work? I should have thought it would have dawned on you. Well, I don't want to be unpleasant. What's going to happen now? No Mervyn! No marquisate in the future! No money in the present, I'm afraid! You've made a hash of it, Trix.'

'I've nothing at all to say to you. If I've—if I've made mistakes, I——'

'You've suffered for them? Yes, I fancy so. And you made some pretty big ones. It was rather a mistake to send me to the right-about, wasn't it? You were warned. You chose to go on. Here you are! Don't you sometimes think you'd better have stuck to me?'

'No!' Trix threw the one word at him with a disgusted contempt which roused his anger even while he admired the effort of her courage.

'What, you're not tamed yet?' he sneered. 'Even this palace, and Glowing Stars, and being the laughing-stock of London haven't tamed you?'

He spoke slowly, never taking his eyes from her; her

defiance worked on the idea in his heart. He had run a fatal risk once before under her influence; he felt her influence again while he derided her. Enough of what he had been clung about him to make him feel how different she was from Connie Fricker. To conquer her and make her acknowledge the conquest was the desire that came upon him, tempting him to forget at what peril he would break with Connie.

'You only came here to laugh at me,' said Trix. 'Well, go on.'

'One can't help laughing a bit,' he remarked; 'but I don't want to be hard on you. If you'd done to some men what you did to me, they mightn't take it so quietly. But I'm ready to be friends.'

'Whatever I did, you've taken more than your revenge—far more. Yes, if you wanted to see me helpless and ruined, here I am! Isn't it enough? Can't you go now?'

'And how's old Mervyn? At any rate I've taken you away from him, the stuck-up fool!'

'I won't discuss Lord Mervyn.'

'He'd be surprised to see us together here, wouldn't he?' He laughed, enjoying the thought of Mervyn's discomfiture; he might make it still more complete if he yielded to his idea. He came round the table and leant against it, crossing his feet; he was within a yard of her chair, and looked down at her in insolent disdain and more insolent admiration. Now again he marked her fear and played on it.

'Yes, we got the whiphand of you, and I think you know it now. And that's what you want; that's the way to treat you. I should have known how to deal with you. What could a fool like Mervyn do with a woman like you? You're full of devil.'

Poor Trix, feeling at that moment by no means full of 'devil,' glanced at him with a new terror. She had set herself to endure his taunts, but the flavour that crept into them now was too much.

'I don't forget we were friends. You're pretty well

stranded now. Well, I'll look after you, if you like. But no more tricks! You must behave yourself.'

'Do you suppose I should ever willingly speak to you again?'

'Yes, I think so. When the last of the money's gone, perhaps? I don't fancy your friends here can help you much. It'll be worth while remembering me then.'

'I'd sooner starve,' said Trix decisively.

'Wait a bit, wait a bit,' he jeered.

'I ask you to go,' she said, pointing to the door. A trivial circumstance interfered with any attempt at more dramatic action; the wire of the bell was broken, as Trix well knew.

'Yes, but you can't always have what you want, can you?' His tone changed to one of bantering intimacy. 'Come, Trix, be a sensible girl. You're beat, and you know it. You'd better drop your airs. By Jove, I wouldn't offer so much to any other woman!'

'What do you want?' she asked curtly and desperately. 'I've got nothing to give you—no more money, no more power, no more influence. I've got nothing.' Her voice shook for a moment as she sketched her worldly position.

A pause followed. Beaufort Chance longed to make the plunge, and yet he feared it. If he told her that she still had what he wanted, he believed that he could bend her to his will; to try at least was the strong impulse in him. But how much would it mean? He was fast in the Fricker net. Yet the very passions which had led him into that entanglement urged him now to break loose, to follow his desire, and to risk everything for it. The tyrannous instinct that Connie had so cleverly played upon would find a far finer satisfaction if the woman he had once wooed when she was exalted, when she gave a favour by listening and could bestow distinction by her consent, should bend before him and come to him in humble submission, owning him her refuge, owing him everything, in abject obedience. That was the picture which wrought upon his mind and appealed

to his nature. He saw nothing unlikely in its realisation, if once he resolved to aim at that. What other refuge had she? And had she not liked him once? She would have liked him more, he told himself, and been true to him, if he had taken a proper tone towards her and assumed a proper mastery—as he had with Connie Fricker; in a passing thought he thanked Connie for teaching him the lesson, and took comfort from the thought. Connie would not be really troublesome; he could manage her too.

'No, you've got nothing,' he said at last; 'but supposing I say I don't mind that?'

Trix looked at him again, and suddenly began to laugh hysterically. The idea he hinted was horrible, but to her it was inexpressibly ludicrous too. She saw what he wanted, what he had the madness to suggest. She was terrified, but she laughed; she knew that her mirth would rouse his fury, but it was not to be resisted. She thought that she would go on laughing, even if he struck her on the face—an event which, for the second time in their acquaintance, did not seem to her unlikely.

'Are you—can you actually——?' she gasped.

'Don't be a fool! There's nothing to laugh at. Hold your tongue and think it over. Remember, I don't bind myself. I'll see how you behave. I'm not going to be fooled by you twice. You ought to know it doesn't pay you to do it too, by now.' He became more jocular. 'You'd have better fun with me than with Mervyn, and I daresay you'll manage to wheedle me into giving you a good deal of your own way after all.'

He was still more outrageous than Trix had thought him before. She was prepared for much, but hardly for this. He had degenerated even from what he had shown himself in their earlier intercourse. Outwardly, among men, in public life, she supposed that he was still presentable, was still reckoned a gentleman. Allowing for the fact that many men were gentlemen in dealing with other men, or appeared such, who failed to preserve even the appearance

with women, she remained amazed at the coarse vulgarity of his words and tone. It is possible that his attentions to Connie Fricker had resulted in a deterioration of his style of treating such matters; or the change may merely have been part of the general lowering the man had undergone.

'Well, I'll be off now,' he said, lifting himself from the table leisurely. 'You think about it. I'll come and see you again.' He held out his hand. 'You're looking deuced pretty to-day,' he told her. 'Pale and interesting, and all that, you know. I say, if we do it, old Mervyn'll look pretty blue, eh? The laugh'll be against him then, won't it?'

Trix had not given him her hand. She was afraid of the parting. Her fears were not groundless. He laughed as he stepped up to her chair. She drew back in horror, guessing his purpose. It would seem to him quite natural to kiss her—she divined that. She had no leisure to judge or to condemn his standard; she knew only that she loathed the idea passionately. She covered her face with her hands.

'Guessed it, did you?' he laughed, rather pleased, and, bending over, he took hold of her wrists and tore her hands from in front of her face.

At this moment, however—and the thing could hardly have been worse timed from one point of view, or better from another—Peggy Ryle opened the door. Peggy trod light, the baize door swung quietly, Beaufort's attention had been much preoccupied. His hands were still on Trix's wrists when he turned at the opening of the door. So far as the facts of the situation went, explanation was superfluous; the meaning of the facts was another matter.

Peggy had come in looking grave, wistful, distressed; the shadow of the Fricker interview was still over her. When she saw the position she stood on the threshold, saying nothing, smiling doubtfully. Trix dropped her hands in her lap with a sigh; pure and great relief was her feeling. Beaufort essayed unconsciousness; it was an elaborate and clumsy effort.

'Glad to have a glimpse of you before I go, Miss Ryle. I called to see how Mrs. Trevalla was, but I must run away now.'

'So sorry,' said Peggy. 'Let me show you the way.'

The doubtful smile gave way to a broader and more mirthful one. Trix's eyes had telegraphed past horror and present thanksgiving. Moreover, Beaufort looked a fool—and Peggy had just come from the Frickers'. This last circumstance she seemed to think would interest Beaufort; or did she merely aim at carrying off the situation by a tactful flow of talk?

'I've just been to call on your friends the Frickers,' she said brightly. 'What a nice girl Miss Fricker is! She says she's great friends with you.'

'I go there a lot on business,' he explained stiffly.

'On business?' Peggy laughed. 'I daresay you do, Mr. Chance! She's so friendly and cordial, isn't she? It must be nice riding with her! And what a beautiful bracelet you gave her!'

Beaufort shot a morose glance at her, and from her to Trix. Trix was smiling, though still agitated. Peggy was laughing in an open good-natured fashion.

'I envied it awfully,' she confessed. 'Diamonds and pearls, Trix—just beauties!'

Mr. Beaufort Chance said good-bye.

'I hope to see you again,' he added to Trix from the doorway.

'Do tell Miss Fricker how much I like her,' Peggy implored, following him to the baize door.

He went downstairs, silently, or not quite silently, cursing Peggy, yet on the whole not ill-pleased with his visit. He seemed to have made some progress in the task of subduing Trix Trevalla. She had been frightened—that was something. He walked off buttoning his frock-coat, looking like a prosperous, orderly, and most respectable gentleman. Fortunately emotions primitively barbarous are not indicated by external labels, or walks in the street would be fraught with strange discoveries.

It did not take long to put Peggy abreast of events; Trix's eyes could have done it almost without words.

'Men are astonishing,' opined Peggy, embracing Beaufort Chance and Fricker in a liberal generalisation.

'They say we're astonishing,' Trix reminded her.

'Oh, that's just because they're stupid.' She grew grave. 'Anyhow they're very annoying,' she concluded.

'He said he'd come again, Peggy. What a worm I am now! I'm horribly afraid.'

'So he did,' Peggy reflected, and sat silent with a queer little smile on her lips.

Trix Trevalla fell into a new fit of despair, or a fresh outpouring of the bitterness that was always in her now.

'I might as well,' she said. 'I might just as well. What else is there left for me? I've made shipwreck of it all, and Beaufort Chance isn't far wrong about me. He's just about the sort of fate I deserve. Why do the things you deserve make you sick to think of them? He wouldn't actually beat me if I behaved properly and did as I was told, I suppose, and that's about as much as I can expect. Oh, I've been such a fool!'

'Having been a fool doesn't matter, if you're sensible now,' said Peggy.

'Sensible! Yes, he told me to be sensible too! I suppose the sensible thing would be to tell him to come again, to lie down before him, and thank him very much if he didn't stamp too hard on me.'

Peggy remembered how Mr. Fricker had hinted that Trix was very much in the position in which her own fancy was now depicting her. Could that be helped? It seemed not —without four thousand pounds anyhow.

Trix came and leant over the back of her chair. 'I laughed at him, Peggy—I laughed, but I might yield. He might frighten me into it. And I've nowhere else to turn. Supposing I went to him with my hundred a year? That's about what I've left myself, I suppose, after everything's paid.'

'Well, that's a lot of money,' said Peggy.

'You child!' cried Trix, half-laughing, half-crying. 'But you're a wonderful child. Can't you save me, Peggy?'

'What from?'

'Oh, I suppose, in the end, from myself. I'm reckless. I'm drifting. Will he come again, Peggy?'

Peggy had no radical remedy, but her immediate prescription was not lacking in wisdom as a temporary expedient. She sent Trix to bed, and was obeyed with a docility which would have satisfied any of those who had set themselves to teach Trix moral lessons. Then Peggy herself sat down and engaged in the task of thinking. It had not been at all a prosperous day. Fricker was a source of despair, Chance of a new apprehension; Trix herself was a perplexity most baffling of all. The ruin of self-respect, bringing in its train an abandonment of hope for self, was a strange and bewildering spectacle; she did not see how to effect its repair. Trix's horror of yielding to the man, combined with her fear that she might yield, was a state of mind beyond Peggy's power of diagnosis; she knew only that it clamoured for instant and strong treatment.

Beaufort Chance would come again! Suddenly Peggy determined that he should—on a day she would fix! She would charge herself with that. She smiled again as a hope came into her mind. She had been considerably impressed with Connie Fricker.

The greater puzzle remained behind, the wider, more forlorn hope on which everything turned. 'How much do men love women?' asked Peggy Ryle.

Then the thought of her pledged word flashed across her mind. She might not tell Airey that Trix was ruined; she might not tell Airey that she herself knew his secret. She had hoped to get something from Airey without those disclosures; it was hopeless without them to ask for four thousand pounds—or three thousand five hundred either.

Having been sent to bed, Trix seemed inclined to stay

there. She lay there all next day, very quiet, but open-eyed, not resting but fretting and fearing, unequal to her evil fortune, prostrated by the vision of her own folly, bereft of power to resist or will to recover from the blow. Peggy watched her for hours, and then, late in the afternoon, slipped out. Her eyes were resolute under the low brow with its encroaching waves of sunny hair.

Airey Newton let her in. The door of the safe was ajar; he pushed it to with his foot. The red-leather book lay open on the table, displaying its neatly ruled, neatly inscribed pages. He saw her glance at it, and she noticed an odd little shrug of his shoulders as he walked across the room and put the tea into the pot. She had her small bag with her, and laid it down by the bread-and-butter plate. Airey knew it by sight; he had seen her stow away in it the money which he delivered to her from the custody of the safe.

'I can't fill that again for you,' he said warningly, as he gave her tea.

'It's not empty. The money's all there.'

'And you want me to take care of it again?' His tone spoke approval.

'I don't know. I may want it, and I mayn't.'

'You're sure to want it,' he declared in smiling despair.

'I mean, I don't know whether I want it now—all in a lump—or not.'

Her bright carelessness of spirit had evidently deserted her to-day; she was full of something. Airey gulped down a cup of tea, lit his pipe, and waited. He had been engrossed in calculations when she arrived—calculations he loved—and had been forced to conceal some impatience at the interruption. He forgot that now.

'There's something on your mind, Peggy,' he said at last. 'Come, out with it!'

'She's broken—broken, Airey. She can't bear to think of it all. She can't bear to think of herself. She seems to have no life left, no will.'

'You mean Mrs. Trevalla?'

'Yes. They've broken her spirit between them. They've made her feel a child, a fool.'

'Who have? Do you mean Mervyn? Do you mean——?'

'I mean Mr. Beaufort Chance—and, above all, Mr. Fricker. She hasn't told you about them?'

'No. I've heard something about Chance. I know nothing about Fricker.'

'She didn't treat them fairly—she knows that. Knows it—I should think so! Poor Trix! And in return——' Peggy stopped. One of the secrets trembled on her lips.

'In return, what?' asked Airey Newton. He had stopped smoking, and was standing opposite to her now.

'They've tricked her and made a fool of her, and——' There was no turning back now—'and stripped her of nearly all she had.'

An almost imperceptible start ran through Airey; his forehead wrinkled in deep lines.

'They bought shares for her, and told her they would be valuable. They've turned out worth nothing, and somehow—you'll understand—she's liable to pay a lot of money on them.'

'Hum! Not fully paid, I suppose?'

'That's it. And she's in debt besides. But it's the shares that are killing her. That's where the bitterness is, Airey.'

'Does she know you're telling me this?'

'I gave her my word that I'd never tell.'

Airey moved restlessly about the room. 'Well?' he said from the other end of it.

'She could get over everything but that. So I went to Mr. Fricker——'

'You went to Fricker?' He came to a stand in amazement.

'Yes, I went to Mr. Fricker to see if he would consent to tell her that she wasn't liable, that the shares had turned out better, and that she needn't pay. I wanted him to take the

shares from her, and let her think that he did it as a matter of business.'

Airey Newton pointed to the little bag. Peggy nodded her head in assent.

'But it's not nearly enough. She'd have to pay three thousand anyhow; he won't do what I wish for less than four. He doesn't want to do it at all; he wants to have her on her knees, to go on knowing she's suffering. And she will go on suffering unless we make her believe what I want her to. He thought I couldn't get anything like the money he asked, so he consented to take it if I did. He told me to come back when I had got it, Airey.'

'Has she got the money?'

'Yes—and perhaps enough more to pay her debts, and just to live. But it's not so much the money; it's the humiliation and the shame. Oh, don't you understand? Mr. Fricker will spare her that if—if he's bribed with a thousand pounds.'

He looked at her eager eyes and flushed cheeks; she pushed back her hair from her brow.

'He asks four thousand pounds,' she said, and added, pointing to the little bag, 'There's five hundred there.'

As she spoke she turned her eyes away from him towards the window. It did not seem to her fair to look at him; and her gaze would tell too much perhaps. She had given him the facts now; what would he make of them? She had broken her word to Trix Trevalla. Her pledge to Tommy Trent was still inviolate. Tommy had trusted her implicitly when she had surprised from him his friend's secret that his carelessness let slip. He had taken her word as he would have accepted the promise of an honourable man, a man honourable in business, or a friend of years. Her knowledge had counted as ignorance for him because she had engaged to be silent. The engagement was not broken yet. She waited fearfully. Airey could save her still. What would he do?

The seconds wore on, seeming very long. They told her

of his struggle. She understood it with a rare sympathy, the sympathy we have for the single scar or stain on the heart of one we love; towards such a thing she could not be bitter. But she hoped passionately that he himself would conquer, would spare both himself and her. If he did, it would be the finest thing in the world, she thought.

She heard him move across to the safe and lock it. She heard him shut the red-leather book with a bang. Would he never speak? She would not look till he did, but she could have cried to him for a single word.

'And that was what you wanted your five hundred for?' he asked at last.

'My five hundred's no good alone.'

'It's all you've got in the world—well, except your pittance.'

She did not resent the word; he spoke it in compassion. She turned to him now and found his eyes on her.

'Oh, it's nothing to me. I never pay any attention to money, you know.' She managed a smile, trying to plead with him to think any such sacrifice a small matter, whether in another or in himself.

'Well, I see your plan, and it's very kind. A little Quixotic perhaps, Peggy——'

'Quixotic! If it saves her pain?' Peggy flashed out in real indignation.

'Anyhow what's the use of talking about it? Five hundred isn't four thousand, and Fricker won't come down, you know.'

It was pathetic to her to listen to the studied carelessness of his voice, to hear the easy reasonable words come from the twitching lips, to see the forced smile under the troubled brow. His agony was revealed to her; he was asked to throw all his dearest overboard. She stretched out her hands towards him.

'I might get help from friends, Airey.'

'Three thousand five hundred pounds?'

With sad bitterness she heard him. He was almost lying now; his manner and tone were a very lie.

'Friends who—who love her, Airey.'

He was silent for long again, moodily looking at her.

'Who would think anything well done, anything well spent, if they could save her pain!'

With an abrupt movement he turned away from her and threw himself into a chair. He could no longer bear the appeal of her eyes. At last it seemed strange as well as moving to him. But he could have no suspicion; he trusted Tommy Trent and conceived his secret to be all his own. His old great shame that Peggy should know joined forces with the hidden passion which was its parent; both fought to keep him silent, both enticed him to delude her still. Yet when she spoke of friends who loved Trix Trevalla, whom could she touch, whom could she move, as she touched and moved him? The appeal went to his heart, trying to storm it against the enemies entrenched there.

Suddenly Peggy hid her face in her hands, and gave one short sob. He looked up startled, clutching the arm of his chair with a fierce grip. He sat like that, his eyes set on her. But when he spoke, it was lamely and almost coldly.

'Of course we should all like to save her pain; we would all do what we could. But think of the money wanted! It's out of the question.'

She sprang to her feet and faced him. For the moment she forgot her tenderness for him; her understanding of his struggle was swept away in indignation.

'You love her!' she cried in defiant challenge. 'You of all people should help her. You of all people should throw all you have at her feet. You love her!'

He made no denial; he rose slowly from his chair and faced her.

'Oh, what is love if it's not that?' she demanded. 'Why, even friendship ought to be that. And love——!' Again her hands were outstretched to him in a last appeal. For still there was time—time to save his honour and her own, time to spare him and her the last shame. 'It would

be riches to you, riches for ever,' she said. 'Yes, just because it's so hard, Airey!'

'What?' The word shot from his lips full of startled fear. Why did she call it hard? The word was strange. She should have said 'impossible.' Had he not put it before her as impossible? But she said 'hard,' and looked in his eyes as she spoke the word.

'Love can't make money where it isn't,' he went on in a dull, dogged, obstinate voice.

'No, but it can give it where it is!' She was carried away. 'And it's here!' she cried in accusing tones.

'Here?' He seemed almost to spring at her with the word.

'Yes, here, in this room—in that safe—everywhere!'

They stood facing one another for a moment.

'You love her—and she's ruined!'

She challenged denial. Airey Newton had no word to say. She raised her hand in the air and seemed to denounce him.

'You love her, she's ruined, and—you're rich! Oh, the shame of it—you're rich, you're rich!'

He sank back into his chair and hid his face from her.

She stood for a moment, looking at him, breathing fast and hard. Then she moved quickly to him, bent on her knee, and kissed his hand passionately. He made no movement, and she slipped quietly and swiftly from the room.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN AUNT—AND A FRIEND

Baralett: July 11.

My dear Sarah,—How I wish you were here! You would enjoy yourself, and I should like to see you doing it—indeed I should be amused. I never dare tell you face to face that you amuse me—you'd swell visibly, like the person in Pickwick—but I can write it quite safely. We are a family party—or at any rate we look forward to being one some day, and even now escape none of the characteristics of such gatherings. We all think that the Proper Thing will happen some day, and we tell one another so. Not for a long while, of course! First—and officially—because Mortimer feels things so deeply (this is a reference to the Improper Thing which so nearly happened—are you wincing, Sarah?); secondly—and entirely unofficially—because of a bad chaperon and a heavy pupil. You are a genius; you ought to have had seventeen daughters, all twins and all out together, and five eldest sons all immensely eligible! Nature is so limited. But me! I'm always there when I'm not wanted, and I do hate leaving a comfortable chair. But I try. Do I give you any clear idea when I say that a certain young person wants a deal of hoisting—and is very ponderous to hoist? And I'm not her mother, or I really wouldn't complain. But sometimes I could shake her, as they say. No, I couldn't shake her, but I should like to get some hydraulic machinery that could. However—it moves all the same! What's-his-name detected that in the world, which is certainly slow enough, and we all detect it in this interesting

case—or say we do. And I've great faith in repeating things. It spreads confidence, whence comes, dear Sarah, action.

Mortimer is here a lot, but is somewhat fretful. The Trans-Euphratic, it seems, is fractious, or teething, or something, and Beaufort Chance has been nasty in the House—notably nasty and rather able. (Do you trace any private history?) However, I daresay you hear enough about the Trans-Euphratic at home. It buzzes about here, mingling soothingly with the approaching flower show and a calamity that has happened to a pedigree cow. Never mind details of any of them! Sir Stapleton was indiscreet to me, but it stops there, if you please. How sweet the country is in a real English home!

But sometimes we talk of the Past—and the P is large. There is a thank-heaveny atmosphere of pronounced density about Lady B.—quite sincere, I believe; she has realised that flightiness almost effected an entry into the family! Mortimer says little—deep feelings again. In my opinion it has done him some little good—which we and Audrey hope speedily to destroy. (Oh, that child! The perfection of English girlhood, Sarah; no less, believe me!) My lord is more communicative—to me. I believe he likes to talk about it. In fact Trix made some impression there; possibly there is a regret hidden somewhere in his circumference. He took me round the place yesterday, and showed me the scene of the flight. I should think going to Waterloo must give one something of the same feeling—if one could be conducted by a wounded hero of the fight. This was the conversation that passed—or something like it:—

Lord B.: She looked almost like a ghost.

Myself: Heavens, Lord B.!

Lord B. (*inserting spud in ground*): This was the very spot—the SPOT!

Myself: You surprise me!

Lord B.: I felt certain that something unusual was occurring.

Myself: Did that strike you at once?

Lord B.: Almost, Viola—I say, almost—at once. She came up. I remonstrated. My words do not remain in my memory.

Myself: Moments of excitement——

Lord B.: But I remonstrated, Viola.

Myself: And she pushed you away?

Lord B.: She did—and ran along the path here—following this path to that gate——

Myself (*incredulously, however one's supposed to show that*): That very gate, Lord B.?

Lord B.: It's been painted since, but that is the gate, Viola.

Myself: Fancy! (There isn't any other gate, you know; so, unless Trix had taken the fence in a flying leap, one doesn't see what she could have done.)

Lord B.: Yes, that gate. She ran through it and along that road——

Myself (*distrustfully*): That road, Lord B.?

Lord B. (*firmly*): That road, Viola. She twisted her veil about her face, caught up her skirts——

Myself: ! ! ! ! !

Lord B.: And ran away (*impressively*) towards the station, Viola!

Myself: Did you watch her?

Lord B.: Till she was out of sight—of sight, Viola!

Myself: I never realised it so clearly before, Lord B.

Lord B.: It is an experience I shall never forget.

Myself: I should think not, Lord B.

Then the excellent old dear said that he trusted he had no unchristian feelings towards Trix; he had been inclined to like her, and so on. But he failed to perceive how they could have treated her differently in any single particular. 'You could not depend on her word, Viola.' I remembered, Sarah, that in early youth, and under circumstances needless to specify exactly, you could not depend on mine—unless the evidence against me was hopelessly clear. I suppose that was Trix's mistake. She fibbed when she was bound to be

found out, and saw it herself a minute later. Have you any personal objection to my dropping a tear?

I don't pretend to say I should go on writing if there was anything else to do, but it will open your mind to give you one more scrap.

Myself: What, Audrey dear, come in already? (*It is* 9.30 *p.m.—evening fine—moon full.*)

Audrey: Yes, it was rather chilly, Auntie, and there's a heavy dew.

Myself (*sweetly*): I thought it such a charming evening for a stroll.

Audrey: I was afraid of my new frock, Auntie.

Myself (*very sweetly*): You're so thoughtful, dear. Has Mortimer come in too?

Audrey: I knew he was busy, so I told him he mustn't leave his work for me. He went in directly then, Auntie.

Myself (*most sweetly*): *How* thoughtful of you, *darling!*

Audrey: He did suggest I should stay a little while, but the dew——

Myself (*breaking down*): Good gracious, Audrey, what in the world &c., &c., &c.

Audrey (*pathetically*): I'm so sorry, Auntie dear!

Now what would you do in such a case, Herr Professor Sarah?

No doubt things will turn out for the best in the end, and I suppose I shall be grateful to poor Trix. But for the moment I wish to goodness she'd never run away! Anyhow she has achieved immortality. Barmouths of future ages will hush their sons and daughters into good marriages by threatening them with Trix Trevalla. She stands for ever the Monument of Lawlessness—with locks bedraggled, and skirts high above the ankle! She has made this aristocratic family safe for a hundred years. She has not lived in vain. And tell me any news of her. Have you had the Frickers to dinner since my eye was off you? There, I must have my little joke. Forgive me, Sarah! Affectionately,

V. B.

'Tut!' said Mrs. Bonfill, laying down the letter, extracts from which she had been reading to her friend Lord Glentorly.

'She's about right as to Chance, anyhow,' he remarked. 'I was in the House, and you couldn't mistake his venom.'

'He doesn't count any longer.' Mrs. Bonfill pronounced the sentence ruthlessly.

'No, not politically. And in every other way he's no more than a tool of Fricker's. Fricker must have him in the hollow of his hand. He knows how he stands; that's the meaning of his bitterness. But he can make poor Mortimer feel, all the same. Still, as you say, there's an end of him!'

'And of her too! She was an extraordinary young woman, George.'

'Uncommonly attractive — no ballast,' summed up Glentorly. 'You never see her now, I suppose?'

'Nobody does,' said Mrs. Bonfill, using 'nobody' in its accepted sense. She sighed gently. 'You can't help people who won't be helped.'

'So Viola Blixworth implies,' he reminded her with a laugh.

'Oh, Viola's hopelessly flippant; but she'll manage it in the end, I expect.' She sighed again and went on, 'I don't know that, after all, one does much good by meddling with other people's affairs.'

'Come, come, this is only a moment of despondency, Sarah.'

'I suppose so,' she agreed, with returning hope. To consider that her present mood represented a right and ultimate conclusion would have been to pronounce a ban on all her activities. 'I've half a mind to propose myself for a visit to Barslett.'

'You couldn't do better,' Lord Glentorly cordially agreed. 'Everything will soon be over here, you see.'

She looked at him a little suspiciously. Did he suggest that she should retreat for a while and let the talk of her failures blow over? He was an old friend, and it was

conceivable that he should seek to convey such a hint delicately.

'I had one letter from Trix,' she continued. 'A confused rigmarole—explanations, and defence, and apologies, and all the rest of it.'

'What did you write to her?'

'I didn't write at all. I put it in the fire.'

Glentorly glanced at his friend as she made this decisive reply. Her handsome, rather massive features were set in a calm repose; no scruples or doubts as to the rectitude of her action assailed her. Trix had chosen to jump over the pale; outside the pale she must abide. But that night, when a lady at dinner argued that she ought to have a vote, he exclaimed with an unmistakable shudder, 'By Jove, you'd be wanting to be judges next!' What turned his thoughts to that direful possibility?

But of course he did not let Mrs. Bonfill perceive any dissent from her judgment or her sentence. He contented himself with saying, 'Well, she's made a pretty mess of it!'

'There's nothing left for her—absolutely nothing,' Mrs. Bonfill concluded. Her tone would have excused, if not justified, Trix's making an end of herself in the river.

Lady Glentorly was equally emphatic on another aspect of the case.

'It's a lesson to all of us,' she told her husband. 'I don't acquit myself, much less can I acquit Sarah Bonfill. This taking up of people merely because they're good-looking and agreeable has gone far enough. You men are mainly responsible for it.'

'My dear!' murmured Glentorly weakly.

'It's well enough to send them a card now and then, but anything more than that—we must put our foot down. The Barmouths of all people! I declare it serves them right!'

'The affair seems to have resulted in serving everybody right,' he reflected. 'So I suppose it's all for the best.'

'Marriage is the point on which we must make a stand.

After a short pause she added an inevitable qualification: 'Unless there are overwhelming reasons the other way. And this woman was never even supposed to be more than decently off.'

'The Barmouths are very much the old style. It was bad luck that she should happen on them.'

'Bad luck, George? It was Sarah Bonfill!'

'Bad luck for Mrs. Trevalla, I mean.'

'You take extraordinary views sometimes, George. Now I call it a Providence.'

In face of a difference so irreconcilable Glentorly abandoned the argument. There were a few like him who harboured a shame-faced sympathy for Trix. They were awed into silence, and the sentence of condemnation passed unopposed.

Yet there were regrets and longings in Mervyn's heart. Veiled under his dignified manner, censured by his cool judgment, hustled into the background by his resolute devotion to the Trans-Euphratic railway and other affairs of state, made to seem shameful by his determination to find a new ideal in a girl of Audrey Pollington's irreproachable stamp, they maintained an obstinate vitality, and, by a perverse turn of feeling, drew their strength from the very features in Trix and in Trix's behaviour which had incurred his severest censure while she was still his and with him.

Remembering her recklessness and her gaiety, recalling her hardly-suppressed rebellion against the life he asked her to lead and the air he gave her to breathe, rehearsing even the offences which had, directly or indirectly, driven her to flight and entailed exile on her, he found in her the embodiment of something that he condemned and yet desired, of something that could not be contained in his life, and thereby seemed in some sort to accuse that life of narrowness. She had shown him a country which he could not and would not enter; at moments the thought of her derisively beckoned him whither he could not go.

At last, under the influence of these ideas, which grew and grew as the first shock of amazed resentment wore off, he came to put questions to himself as to the part that he had played, to realise a little how it had all seemed to her. This was not to blame himself or his part; he and it were still to him right and inevitable. But it was a step towards perceiving something deeper than the casual perversity or dishonesty of one woman. He had inklings of an ultimate incompatibility of lives, of ways, of training, of thought, of outlook on the world. Both she and he had disregarded the existence of such a thing. The immediate causes of her flight—her dishonesty and her fear of discovery—became, in this view, merely the occasion of it. In the end he asked whether she had not shown a kind of desperate courage, perhaps even a wild inspiration of wisdom, in what she had done. Gradually his anger against her died away, and there came in its place a sorrow, not that the thing she fled from was not to be, but that it never could have been in any true or adequate sense. Perhaps she herself had seen that—seen it in some flashing vision of despair which drove her headlong from the house by night. Feelings that Trix could not analyse for herself he thought out for her with his slow, narrow, but patient and thorough-going mind. The task was hard, for wounded pride still cried out in loud protest against it; but he made way with it. If he could traverse the path of it to the end, there stood comprehension, yes, and acquiescence; then it would appear that Trix Trevalla had refused to pile error on error; in her blind way she would have done right.

That things we have desired did not come to pass may be sad; that they never could have is sadder, by so much as the law we understand seems a more cruel force than the chance that hits us once, we know not whence, and may never strike again. The chance seems only a perverse accident falling on us from outside; the law abides, a limitation of ourselves. Towards such a consciousness as this Mervyn struggled.

At last he hinted something of what was in his mind to Viola Blixworth. He talked in abstract terms, with an air of studying human nature, not of discussing any concrete case; he was still a little pompous over it, and still entirely engrossed in his own feelings. His preoccupation was to prove that he deserved no ridicule, since fate, and not merely folly, had made him its unwilling plaything. She heard him with unusual seriousness, in an instant divining the direction of his thoughts; and she fastened on the mood, turning it to what she wanted.

'That should make you tolerant towards Mrs. Trevalla,' she suggested, as they walked together by the fountains.

'I suppose so, yes. It leaves us both slaves of something too strong for us.'

She passed by the affected humility that defaced his smile; she never expected too much, and was finding in him more than she had hoped.

'If you've any allowance for her, any gentleness towards her——'

'I feel very little anger now.'

'Then tell her so, Mortimer. Oh, I don't mean go to her. On all accounts you'd better not do that.' (Her smile was not altogether for Mervyn here; she spared some of it for her duties and position as an aunt.) 'But write to her.'

'What should I say?' The idea was plainly new to him. 'Do you mean that I'm to forgive her?'

'I wouldn't put it quite like that, Mortimer. That would be all right if you were proposing to—renew the arrangement. But I suppose you're not?'

He shook his head decisively. As a woman Lady Blixworth was rather sorry to see so much decision; it was her duty as an aunt to rejoice.

'Couldn't you manage to convey that it was nobody's fault in particular? Or something like that?'

He weighed the suggestion. 'I couldn't go quite so far,' he concluded, with a judicial air.

'Well, then, that the mistake was in trying it at all? Or in being in a hurry? Or—or that perhaps your manner——?'

'No, I don't think there was anything wrong with my manner.'

'Could you say you understood her feelings—or, at any rate, allowed for them?'

'Perhaps I might say that.'

'At any rate you could say something comforting.' She put her arm through his. 'She's miserable about you, I know. You can say something?'

'I'll try to say something.'

'I know you'll say it nicely. You're a gentleman, Mortimer.'

She could not have used a better appeal, simple as it sounded. All through the affair—all through his life, it might be said—he had been a gentleman; he had never been consciously unkind, although he had often been to Trix unconsciously unbearable. Viola Blixworth put him on his honour by the name he reverenced.

'You'll feel better after you've done it—and more like settling down again,' said she. Friendship and auntship mingled. It would comfort Trix to hear that he had no bitterness; it would certainly assist Audrey if he could cease from studying his precise feelings, of any nature whatsoever, about another woman. Lady Blixworth was so accustomed to finding her motives mixed that a moderate degree of adulteration in them had ceased to impair her satisfaction with a useful deed. Besides, is not auntship also praiseworthy? Society said yes, and she never differed from it when its verdicts were convenient.

The letter was written; it was a hard morning's work, for he penned it as carefully as though it were to go into some archives of state. He would say no more than the truth as he had at last reached it; he said no less with equal conscientiousness. The result was stiff with all his stiffness, but there was kindness in it too. It was not forgiveness; it was acquiescence and a measure of understanding. And he

convinced himself more and more as he wrote; in the end he did come very near to saying that there had been mistakes on both sides; he even set it down as a possible hypothesis that the initial error had been his. He had a born respect for written documents, and of written documents not the least of his respect was for his own. He had never felt so sure that there was an end of Trix Trevalla, so far as he was concerned, as when he had put the fact on record over his own signature.

With a sigh he rose and came out into the garden. Audrey sat there reading a novel, which she laid face downwards in her lap at his approach. He took a chair by her, and looked round on the domain that was to be his. Then he glanced at statuesque Audrey. Lady Blixworth viewed them from afar; an instinct told her that the letter had been written. The aunt hoped while the friend rejoiced.

'He must have proved that he needs quite a different wife from Trix, and where could he find one more different?' she mused.

'It's beautiful here in summer, isn't it?' he asked Audrey.

'It must be splendid always,' said she.

'I wish public life allowed me to enjoy more of it.' It is what public men generally say.

'Your work is so important, you see.'

He stretched out his legs and took off his hat.

'But you must rest sometimes,' she urged, with an imploring glance.

'So my mother's always telling me. Well, anyhow, since you like Barslett, I hope you'll stay a long time, Miss Pollington.'

It was not much, but Audrey carried it to Lady Blixworth—or, to put the matter with more propriety, she repeated his remark quite casually. It was not poor Audrey's fault if, in self-defence, she had to make the most of such remarks. Lady Blixworth kissed her niece thoughtfully.

'Another year of my life,' she remarked to the looking-

glass that evening, in the course of a study of time's ravages —'another year or thereabouts will probably see a successful termination to the affair.'

She smiled a little bitterly. Her life, as she understood the term, had few more years to run, and to give up one was a sacrifice. It was, however, no use trying to alter the Barmouth pace. She had done what she could—a good turn to Trix Trevalla, another little lift for Audrey.

'I'm becoming a regular Sarah Bonfill,' she concluded, as she went down to dinner.

The next Saturday Mrs. Bonfill herself came.

'How is Mortimer?' she whispered at the first opportunity.

'My dear Sarah, I doubt if you could have interfered with more tactfulness yourself.'

'And where's dear Audrey?'

'I hope and believe that she's sticking pins into a map to show where the Trans-Euphratic is to run. Kindly pat me on the back, Sarah.'

Mrs. Bonfill's smile was friendly pat enough, but it was all for Audrey; she asked nothing about Trix Trevalla.

Wide apart as the two were, Trix read the letter with something of the feeling under which Mervyn had written it. He was a good man, but not good for her—that seemed to sum up the matter. Perhaps her first smile of genuine mirth since her fall and flight was summoned to her lips by the familiar stiffness, the old careful balance of his sentences, the pain by which he held himself back from lecturing. A smile of another kind recognised his straightforwardness and his chivalry; he wrote like a gentleman, as Viola Blixworth knew he would. She was more in sympathy with him when he deplored the gulf between them than when he had told her it was but a ford which duty called on her to pass. 'How much have I escaped, and how much have I lost?' she asked; but the question came in sadness, not in doubt. It was not hers to taste the good; it would have been hers to drink the evil to the dregs. Reading his letter, she praised

him and reviled herself; but she rejoiced that she had left him while yet there was time; she rejoiced honestly to see that she would remain in his memory as a thing that was unaccountable, that should not have been, that had come and gone, had given some pain but had done no permanent harm.

'I've got off cheaply,' she thought; her own sufferings were not in her mind, but his; she was glad that her burden of guilt was no heavier. For Mervyn was not as Beaufort Chance; he had done nothing to make her feel that they were quits and her wrong-doing obliterated by the revenge taken for it. She could blame herself less, since even Mervyn seemed to see that, if to begin had been criminal, to go on would have been worse. But bitterness was still in her; her folly seemed still so black, her ruin so humiliating, that she must cry, 'Unfit for him! No, it's for any man that I'm unfit!' Mervyn could but comfort her a little as to what concerned himself; her sin against herself remained unpardoned. And now in her mind that sin had taken on a darker colour; since she had looked in Airey Newton's eyes she could not believe herself the woman who had done such things. The man who, having found the pearl, went and sold all that he had and bought the field where it lay, doubtless did well and was well-pleased. What did the vendor feel who bartered his right for a small price because he had overlooked the pearl?

Mervyn showed her reply to Lady Blixworth—another proof that Aunt Viola was advancing in his confidence, and repressing natural emotions with a laudable devotion to duty. Upon this Lady Blixworth wrote to Peggy Ryle:—

'This letter is not,' she said, 'to praise myself, Peggy, nor to point out my many virtues, but to ask a question. I have indeed done much good. Mortimer is convinced that immutable laws were in fault—and I agree, since the dulness of Barslett and the family preachiness are absolutely immutable. Trix is convinced too—and again I agree, since Trix is naturally both headlong and sincere, an awful combination

if one were married to Mortimer. So I praise myself for having made both of them resigned, and presently to be cheerful! Needless to say, I praise myself on another score, and am backing myself to mother young women against Sarah Bonfill herself (who, by the way, is here, and resettles the Cabinet twice a day—mere bravado, I believe, after her shocking blunders, but Sarah bravadoes with a noble solidity that makes the thing almost a British quality!). I wander! What I really ask—and I want to ask it in italics—is, *Whom is she in love with?* Trix, I mean, of course. I am not in telegraphic, telephonic, or telepathic communication with her, but she says in her letter to Mortimer, "I was not fit for you. Am I fit for any man?" My dear, believe your elders when you can, and listen in silence when you can't! In all my experience I never knew a woman ask that question unless she was in love. Heavens, do we want to be fit for or to please the Abstract Man? Not a bit of it, Peggy! The idea is even revolting, as a thousand good ladies would prove to you. "Am I fit for any man?" Who's "any man," Peggy? Let's have his name and the street where he resides. For my part, I believed there was a man at the back of it all the time—which was no great sagacity—and I said so to Lord Barmouth—which I felt to be audacity. Peggy, tell me his name. "Am I fit for any man?" Poor Trix is still rather upset and melodramatic! But we know what it means. And what are you doing? Do you want a husband? Here am I, started in trade as an honest broker! Come along!'

This letter, Peggy felt, was in a way consoling; she hoped that Trix was in love. But so far as it seemed to be intended to be amusing, Peggy really didn't see it. The fact is, Peggy was in a mood to perceive wit only of the clearest and most commanding quality. Things were very dark indeed, just these days, with Peggy. However, she replied to Lady Blixworth, said she had no notion what she meant, but told her that she was a good friend and a good aunt.

'The latter statements,' observed Lady Blixworth complacently, 'are at the present moment true. As for the former —oh, Peggy, Peggy!'

She was, in fact, rather hurt. A refusal to betray one friend is usually considered a reflection on the discretion of another.

CHAPTER XIX

'NO MORE THAN A GLIMMER'

FORTY-EIGHT hours had passed since Peggy Ryle fled from Danes Inn. How they had gone Airey Newton could scarcely tell; as he looked back, they seemed to hold little except the ever-reiterated cry, 'The shame of it—you're rich!' But still the contents of the safe were intact, and no entries had been cancelled in the red-leather book. A dozen times he had taken the book, looked through it, and thrown it from him again. A clash of passions filled him; the old life he had chosen, with its strange, strong, secret delight and its sense of hidden power, fought against the new suggestion. It was no longer of much moment to him that Peggy knew or that it was Peggy's voice which had cried out the bitter reproach. These things now seemed accidental. Peggy or another—it mattered little.

Yet he had sent for Tommy Trent, and reproached him; he was eager to reproach anybody besides himself.

'I told nobody,' protested Tommy, in indignant surprise. Then the thought flashed on him. 'Was it Peggy?' he asked incredulously. Airey's nod started all the story. His view was what Peggy had foreseen; he found no arguments to weigh against that breaking of her word which had made him seem a traitor in the eyes of his friend.

'A woman setting the world right is the most unscrupulous thing in the world,' he declared angrily. 'You believe I never meant to break faith, old fellow? I shall have it out with her, you may be sure.' He paused and then added, 'I can't believe she'll let it go any further, you know.'

To that also Airey seemed more than half-indifferent now; the old furtive solicitude for his secret, the old shame lest it should escape, seemed to be leaving him, or at least to be losing half their force, in face of some greater thing in his mind. He had himself to deal with now—what he was, not what was said or thought of him. But he did not intercede with Tommy's sternness against Peggy; he let it pass.

'I don't blame you. It's done now. You'd better leave me alone,' he said.

Tommy went and sought Peggy with wrath in his heart; but for all these two days she was obstinately invisible. She was not to be found in Harriet Street, and none of her circle had seen her. It may be surmised that she wandered desolately through fashionable gatherings and haunts of amusement, slinking home late at night. It is certain that she did not wish to meet Tommy Trent, that she would not for the world have encountered Airey Newton. There seemed to be gunpowder in the air of all familiar places; in the reaction of fear after her desperate venture Peggy withdrew herself to the safety of the unknown.

Airey sat waiting, his eyes constantly looking to the clock. Trix was coming to see him; she had written that she needed advice, and that he was the only friend she had to turn to in such a matter. 'Peggy is no use to me in the particular way I want help, and I have something to tell which I could tell to nobody but her or you.' He knew what she had to tell; the fact that she came to tell it to him was proof positive that she had heard nothing from Peggy. He had not forbidden her coming. Though it might be agony to him, yet he willed that she should come; beyond that point his will was paralysed.

In dainty and costly garb she came, still the vision of riches which had first struck his eyes when he saw her at the beginning of her campaign in London; yet though this was her outward seeming, her air and manner raised in him a remoter memory, bringing back to mind the pathetic figure at the Paris hotel. It was easy to see that she held no

secret of his, and that he had no reproach to fear. Her burden lay in her own secret that she must tell, in the self-reproach against which she had no defence. Of neither part of Peggy's double treachery had she any suspicion.

'Long ago I told you I should come if I got into trouble. Here I am!' Her effort at gaiety was tremulous and ill-sustained.

'Yes, I know you've been in trouble.'

'Oh, I don't mean that. That's all over. It's something else. Will you listen? It's not easy to say.'

He gave her a chair and stood by the mantelpiece himself, leaning his elbow on it and his chin on his hand. For a minute or two he did not attend to her; his mind flew back to his own life, to his past work and its success, to those fruits of success which had come to usurp the place not merely of success but of the worthy work itself. She had been stammering out the first part of her story for some while before he turned to her and listened, with sombre eyes set on her nervous face. At that instant she seemed to him an enemy. She had come to rob him. Why should he be robbed because this woman had been a fool? So put, the argument sounded strong and sensible; it made short work of sentimentality. If he sent her away empty, what harm was done? Tommy Trent would think as he had always thought —no less, no worse. For the rest, it was only to take just offence with the girl who had put him to shame, and to see her no more. The old life, the old delight, held out alluring arms to him.

Trix Trevalla stumbled on, all unconscious of the great battle that she fought for another, anxious only to tell her story truthfully, and yet not so as to seem a creature too abject.

'That's the end of it,' she said at last with a woeful smile. 'After Glowing Stars and the other debts, I may have forty shillings a week or thereabouts. But I want to show you my investments, and I want you to tell me what I ought to sell and what few I might best try to keep. Every

pound makes a difference, you know.' The intense conviction of a convert spoke in the concluding words.

'Why do you think I know about such things?'

'Oh, I daresay Mr. Trent would know better, but I couldn't make up my mind to tell him. And I've no right to bother him. I seem to have a right to bother you, somehow.' She smiled again for an instant, and raised her eyes to his. 'Because of what you said at Paris! You remember?'

'You hold me responsible still, I see.'

'Oh, that's our old joke,' she said, fearing to seem too serious in her fanciful claim. 'But still it does always seem to me that we've been in it together; all through it your words have kept coming back, and I've thought of you here. I think you were always in my mind. Well, that's foolish. Anyhow you'll tell me what you think?'

'At least I didn't tell you to trust Fricker.'

'Please don't,' she implored. 'That's the worst of all. That's the thing I can't bear to think of. I thought myself a match for him. And now——!' Her outspread hands accepted any scornful description.

She came to him and put into his hand a paper on which she had drawn up some sort of a statement of her ventures, of her debts, and of her position as she understood it. He took it and glanced through it.

'Heavens, how you spent money!' he exclaimed, in involuntary horror.

She blushed painfully: could she point out how little that had mattered when she was going to be Lady Mervyn?

'And the losses in speculation! You seem never to have been in anything sound!'

'They deceived me,' she faltered. 'Oh, I know all that! Must you say that again? Tell me—what will there be left? Will there be enough to—to exist upon? Or must I'—she broke into a smile of ridicule—'or must I try to work?'

There was a pathetic absurdity about the suggestion. Airey's gruff laugh relieved the sternness of his indignation.

'Yes, I've shown such fine practical talents, haven't I?' she asked forlornly.

'You were very extravagant, but you'd have been in a tolerable position but for Fricker. Dramoffskys and Glowing Stars between them have done the mischief.'

'Yes. If I hadn't cheated him, and he hadn't cheated me in return, I should have been in a tolerable position. But I knew that before I came here, Mr. Newton.'

'Well, it's the truth,' he persisted, looking at her grimly over the top of the paper.

'You needn't repeat it,' she flashed out indignantly. Then her tone changed suddenly. 'Forgive me; it's so hard to hear the truth sometimes, to know it's true, to have nothing to answer.'

'Yes, it is hard sometimes,' Airey agreed.

'Oh, you don't know. You've not cheated and been cheated; you've had nothing to conceal, nothing to lie about, nothing that you dreaded being found out in.' She wrung her hands despairingly.

'I've warned you before now not to idealise me.'

'I can't help it. I believe even your Paris advice was all right, if I'd understood it rightly. You didn't mean that I was to think only of myself and nothing of anybody else, to do nothing for anyone, to share nothing with anyone. You meant I was to make other people happy too, didn't you?'

'I don't know what I meant,' he growled, as he laid her paper on the mantelpiece.

Trix wandered to the window and sat down in the chair generally appropriated to Peggy Ryle.

'I'm sick of myself,' she said.

'A self's not such an easy thing to get rid of, though.'

She glanced at him with some constraint. 'I'm afraid I'm bothering you? I really have no right to make you

doleful over my follies. You've kept out of it all yourself; I needn't drag you into it.' She rose as if she would go. Airey Newton stood motionless. It seemed as though he would let her leave him without a word.

She had not in her heart believed that he would. She in her turn stood still for a moment. When he made no sign, she raised her head in proud resentment; her voice was cold and offended. 'I'm sorry I troubled you, Mr. Newton.' She began to walk towards the door, passing him on the way. Suddenly he sprang forward and caught her by the hands.

'Don't go!' he said in a peremptory yet half-stifled whisper.

Trix's eyes filled with tears. 'I thought you couldn't really mean to do that,' she murmured. 'Oh, think of what it is, think of it! What's left for me?'

He had loosed her hands as quickly as he had caught them, and she clasped them in entreaty.

'I'm neither bad enough nor good enough. I tried to marry for position and money. I was bad enough to do that. I wasn't bad enough to go on telling the lies. Oh, I began! Now I'm not good enough or brave enough to face what I've brought myself to. And yet it would kill me to be bad enough and degraded enough to take the only way out.'

'What way do you mean?'

'I can't tell you about that,' she said. 'I should be too ashamed. But some day you may hear I've done it. How am I to resist? Is it worth resisting? Am I worth saving at all?'

She had never seemed to him so much worth saving. And he knew that he could save her, if he would pay the price. He guessed, too, what she hinted at; there was only one thing that a woman like her could speak of as at once a refuge and a degradation, as a thing that killed her and yet a thing that she might come to do. Peggy Ryle had told him that he loved her, and he had

not denied it then. Still less could he deny it now, with the woman herself before him in living presence.

She saw that he had guessed what was in her mind.

'Men can't understand women doing that sort of thing, I know,' she went on. 'I suppose it strikes them with horror. They don't understand what it is to be helpless.' Her voice shook. 'I've had a great deal of hardship, and I can't bear it any more. I'm a coward in the end, I suppose. My gleam of good days has made me a coward at the thought of bad ones again.' She added, after a pause, 'You'll look at the statement and let me know what you think, won't you? It might just make all the difference.' Again she paused. 'It seems funny to stand here and tell you that, if necessary, I shall probably sell myself; that's what it comes to. But you know so much about me already, and—and I know you'd like me if—if it was humanly possible to do anything except despise me. Wouldn't you? So do look carefully at the paper and go into the figures, please. Because I—even I—don't want to sell myself for money.'

What else was he doing with himself? The words hit home. If the body were sold, did not the soul pass too? If the soul were bartered, what value was it to keep the body? Peggy had begged him to save this woman pain; unconsciously she herself asked a greater rescue than that. And she offered him, still all unconsciously, a great salvation. Was it strange that she should talk of selling herself for money? Then was it not strange too that he had been doing that very thing for years, and had done it of deliberate choice, under the stress of no fear and of no necessity? The picture of himself that had been dim, that Tommy Trent had always refused to make clearer, that even Peggy Ryle's passionate reproach had left still but half-revealed, suddenly stood out before his eyes plain and sharp in every outline. He felt that it was a thing to be loathed.

She saw his face stern and contracted with the pain of his thoughts.

'Yes, I've told you all the truth about myself, and that's how you look!' she said.

He smiled bitterly at her mistake, and fixed his eyes on her as he asked:—

'Could you change a man, if you gave yourself to him? Could you drive out his devil, and make a new man of him? Could you give him a new life, a new heart, a new character?'

'I should have no such hopes. My eyes would be quite open.' Her thoughts were on Beaufort Chance.

'No, but couldn't you?' he urged, with a wistful persistence. 'If you knew the worst of him and would still look for something good—something you could love and could use to make the rest better? Couldn't you make him cease being what he hated being? Couldn't you have a power greater than the power of the enemy in him? If you loved him, I mean.'

'How could I love him?' she asked wonderingly.

'If he loved you?'

'What does such a man mean by love?' she murmured scornfully.

'I wonder if you could do anything like that,' he went on. 'Women have, I suppose. Could you?'

'Oh, don't talk about the thing. I hope I may have courage to throw it aside.'

He started a little. 'Ah, you mean—— No, I was thinking of something else.'

'And how could such a woman as I am make any man better?' She smiled in a faint ridicule of the idea; but she ceased to think of leaving him, and sat down by the table. For the moment he seemed to pay little attention to where she was or what she did; he spoke to her indeed, but his air was absent and his eyes aloof.

'Because, if the woman couldn't, if it turned out that she couldn't, the last state would be worse than the first. Murder added to *felo de se!* There's that to consider.' Now he returned to her in an active consciousness of her

presence. 'Suppose you loved a man who had one great—well, one great devil in him? Could you love a man with a devil in him?'

There was a touch of humour hardly won in his voice. Trix responded to it.

'With a thousand, if he was a man after all!'

'Ah, yes, I daresay. But with one—one immense fellow—a fellow who had sat on him and flattened him for years? Could you fight the fellow and beat him?'

Trix thought. 'I think I might have perhaps, before—before I got a devil too, you know.'

'Say he was a swindler—could you keep him straight? Say he was cruel—could you make him kind?' He paused an instant. 'Suppose he was a churl—could you open his heart?'

'All that would be very, very hard, even for a good woman,' said Trix Trevalla. 'And you know that in a case something like those I failed before.'

'Because, if you couldn't, it would be hell to you, and worse hell to him.'

'Yes,' murmured Trix. 'That would be it exactly.'

'But if you could——' He walked to the window and looked out. 'It would be something like pulling down the other side of the Inn and giving the sun fair play,' said he.

'But could the man do anything for her?' asked Trix. 'Something I said started you on this. The man I thought of would do nothing but make the bad worse. If she were mean first, he'd make her meaner; if she lied before, she'd have to lie more; and he'd—he'd break down the last of her woman's pride.'

'I don't mean a man like that.'

'No, and you're not thinking of a woman like me.'

'She'd have to take the place of the thing that had mastered him; he'd have to find more delight in her than in it; she'd have to take its place as the centre of his life.' He was thinking out his problem before her.

At last Trix was stirred to curiosity. Did any man argue

another's case like this? Was any man roused in this fashion by an abstract discussion? Or if he were dissuading her from the step she had hinted at, was not his method perversely roundabout? She looked at him with inquiring eyes. In answer he came across the room to her.

'Yet, if there were a man and a woman such as we've been speaking of, and there was half the shadow of a chance, oughtn't they to clutch at it? Oughtn't they to play the bold game? Ought they to give it up?'

His excitement was unmistakable now. Again he looked in her eyes as he had once before. She could do nothing but look up at him, expecting what he would say next. But he drew back from her, seeming to repent of what he had said, or to retreat from its natural meaning. He wandered back to the hearthrug, and fingered the statement of her position that lay on the mantelpiece. He was frowning and smiling too; he looked very puzzled, very kindly, almost amused.

'Wouldn't they be fools not to have a shot?' he asked presently. 'Only she ought to know the truth first, and he'd find it deuced hard to tell her.'

'She would have found it very hard to tell him.'

'But she would have?'

'Yes—if she loved him,' said Trix, smiling. 'Confession and humiliation comfort women when they're in love. When they're not——' She shuddered. Presumably Barslett came into her mind.

'If he never told her at all, would that be fair?'

'She couldn't forgive that, if she found it out.'

'No?'

'Well, it would be very difficult.'

'But if she never found it out?'

'That would be the grandest triumph of all for her, perhaps,' said Trix very softly. For now, vague, undefined, ignorant still, but yet sure at its mark, had come the idea that somehow, for some reason, Airey Newton spoke not of Beaufort Chance, nor of another, not of some abstraction

or some hypothetical man, but of his very self. 'My prayer to him would be not to tell me, and that I might never know on earth. If I knew ever, anywhere, then I should know too what God had let me do.'

'But if he never told you, and some day you found out?'

Trix looked across at him—at his dreary smile and his knitted brow. She amended the judgment she had given a minute before: 'We could cry together, or laugh together, or something, couldn't we?' she asked.

He came near her again and seemed to take a survey of her from the feather in her hat to the toe of her polished boot.

'It's a confounded incongruous thing that you should be ruined,' he grumbled; his tone was a sheer grumble, and it made Trix smile again.

'A fool and her money——' she suggested as a time-honoured explanation. 'But ruin doesn't suit me, there's no doubt of that. Perhaps, after all, I was right to try to be rich, though I tried in such questionable ways.'

'You wouldn't be content to be poor?'

Trix was candid with him and with herself. 'Possibly—if everything else was very perfect.'

He pressed her hard. 'Could everything else seem perfect?'

She laughed uncomfortably. 'You understand wonderfully well, considering——!' A little wave of her arm indicated the room in Danes Inn.

'Yes, I understand,' he agreed gravely.

Again she rose. 'Well, I'm a little comforted,' she declared. 'You and Peggy and the rest of you always do me good. You always seemed the alternative in the background. You're the only thing now—or I'll try to make you. That doesn't sound overwhelmingly cordial, but it's well-meant, Mr. Newton.'

She held out her hand to him, but added as an afterthought, 'And you will tell me what to do about the investments, won't you?'

'And what will you do about the other man?'

Her answer was to give him both hands, saying, 'Help me!'

He looked long at her and at last answered, 'Yes, if you'll let me.'

'Thanks,' she murmured, pressing his hands and then letting them go with a sigh of relief. He smiled at her, but not very brightly; there was an effort about it. She understood that the subject was painful to him, because it suggested degradation for her; she had a hope that it was distasteful for another reason; to her these were explanations enough for the forced aspect of his smile.

He took up the paper again, and appeared to read it over.

'Not a bad list,' he said. 'You ought to be able to realise pretty well, as prices go now; they're not ruling high, you know.'

'What a lot you learn from your eyrie here!'

'All that comes in in business,' he assured her. 'No, they're not so bad, except the speculations, of course.'

'Except Glowing Stars! But, after all, most of them are Glowing Stars.'

He appeared to consider again; then he said slowly, and as though every word cost him a thought, 'I shouldn't altogether despair even of Glowing Stars. No, don't be in a hurry to despair of Glowing Stars.'

'What?' Incredulity cried out in her tone, mingled with the fancied hope of impossible good-fortune. 'You can't conceivably mean that Mr. Fricker is wrong about them? Oh, if that were true!'

'Does it make all that difference?'

'Yes, yes, yes! Not the money only, but the sense of folly—of childish miserable silliness.' She was eager to show him how much that fancied distant hope could mean.

'I promise nothing—but Fricker deceived you before. He lied when he told you they were all right; he may be lying when he tells you they're all wrong.'

'But what good could that do him?'

'If you threw them on the market the price would fall. Suppose he wanted to buy!'

Luckily Trix did not wait to analyse the suggestion; she flew to the next difficulty.

'But the liability?'

'I'll look into it, and let you know. Don't cherish any hope.'

'No, but you must have meant that there was a glimmer of hope?' She insisted urgently, turning a strained, agitated face up to his.

'If you'll swear to think it no more than a glimmer—a glimmer let it be.'

'You always tell me the truth. I'll remember—a glimmer.'

'No more,' he insisted, with a marked pertinacity.

'No more, on my honour,' said Trix Trevalla.

She had gone towards the door; he followed till he was by the little table. He stood there and picked up the red book in his hand.

'No more than a glimmer,' he repeated, 'because things may go all wrong in the end still.'

'Not if they depend on you!' she cried, with a gaiety inspired by the hope which he did not altogether forbid, and by the trust that she had in him.

'Even though they depended altogether on me.' He flung the book down and came close to her. 'If they go right, I shall thank heaven for sending you here to-day. And now—I have a thing that I must do.'

'Yes, I've taken a terrible lot of your time. Good-bye.' She yielded to her impulse towards intimacy, towards knowing what he did, how he spent his time. 'Are you going to work? Are you going to try and invent things?'

'No, I'm going to study that book.' He pointed to it with a shrug.

'What's inside?'

'I don't know what I shall find inside,' he told her.

'Good news or bad? The old story or a new one? I can't tell.'

'You don't mean to tell me—that's clear anyhow,' laughed Trix. 'Impertinent questions politely evaded! I take the hint. Good-bye. And, Mr. Newton—a glimmer of hope!'

'Yes, a glimmer,' he said, passing his hand over his brow rather wearily.

'Well, I must leave you to the secrets of the red book,' she ended.

He came to the top of the stairs with her. Half-way down she turned and kissed her hand to him. Her step was a thousand times more buoyant; her smiles came as though native-born again and no longer timid strangers. Such was the work that a glimmer of hope could do.

To subtract instead of adding, to divide instead of multiplying, to lessen after increase, to draw out instead of paying in—these operations, whether with regard to a man's fame, or his power, or his substance, or even the scope of his tastes and the joy of his recreations, are precisely those which philosophy assumes to teach us to perform gracefully and with no exaggerated pangs. The man himself remains, says popular philosophy; and the pulpit sometimes seconds the remark, adding thereunto illustrative texts. Consolations conceived in this vein are probably useful, even though they may conceal a fallacy or succeed by some pious fraud on the truth. It is a narrow view of a man which excludes what he holds, what he has done and made. If he must lose his grasp on that, part of his true self goes with it. The better teachers inculcate not throwing away but exchange, renunciation here for the sake of acquisition there, a narrowing of borders on one side that there may be strength to conquer fairer fields on the other. Could Airey Newton, who had so often turned in impatience or deafness from the first gospel, perceive the truth of the second? He was left to fight for that—left between the red book and the memory of Trix Trevalla.

But Trix went home on feet lighter than had borne her for many a day. To her nature hope was ever fact, or even better—richer, wider, more brightly coloured. Airey had given her hope. She swung back the baize door of Peggy's flat with a cheerful vigour, and called aloud:—

'Peggy, where are you? I've something to tell you, Peggy.'

For once Peggy was there. 'I'm changing my frock,' she cried from her room in a voice that sounded needlessly prohibitory.

'I want to tell you something,' called Trix. 'I've been to Airey Newton's——'

Peggy's door flew open; she appeared gownless; her brush was in her hand, and her hair streamed down her back.

'Oh, your hair!' exclaimed Trix—as she always did when she saw it thus displayed.

Peggy's scared face showed no appreciation of the impulsive compliment.

'You've been to Airey's, and you've something to tell me?' she said, scanning Trix with unconcealed anxiety.

But Trix did not appear to be in an accusing mood; she had no charge of broken faith to launch, or of confidence betrayed.

'I told him how I stood—that I was pretty well ruined,' she explained, 'and he was so kind about it. And what do you think?' She paused for effect. Peggy had recourse to diplomacy; she flung her masses of hair to and fro, passing the brush over them in quick dexterous strokes as they went.

'Well?' she asked, with more indifference than was even polite, much less plausible.

But Trix noticed nothing; she was too full of the news.

'He told me there was a glimmer of hope for Glowing Stars!'

'He said that?'

Peggy's voice now did full justice to the importance of the tidings.

'Yes, hope for Glowing Stars. Peggy, if it should come out right!'

'If it should!' gasped Peggy. 'What did you say he said?'

'That there was hope for Glowing Stars—that I oughtn't to——'

'No, you told me another word you said he used another word.'

'Oh, yes, he was very particular about it,' smiled Trix. 'And, of course, I mustn't exaggerate. He said there was a glimmer of hope.'

'Ah!' said Peggy. 'I'll come into the other room directly, dear.'

She went back to the looking-glass and proceeded with the task of brushing her hair. Her face underwent changes which that operation (however artistically performed and consistently successful in its effect) hardly warranted. She frowned, she smiled, she grew pensive, she became gloomy, she nodded, she shook her head. Once she shivered as though in apprehension. Once she danced a step, and then stopped herself with an emphatic and angry stamp.

'A glimmer of hope!' she murmured at last. 'And poor dear old Airey's left there in Danes Inn, fighting it out alone!' She joined her hands behind her head, burying them in the thickness of her hair. 'Oh, Airey dear, be good,' she whispered; 'do be good!'

She was so wrapped up in this invocation or entreaty that she quite lost sight of the fact that she herself was relieved of one part of her burden. Trix could not charge her with treachery now. But then it had never been Trix's accusation that she feared the most.

CHAPTER XX

PURELY BUSINESS

THEY did not know what they had been summoned for, and they were rather discontented.

'Just in the middle of a business man's business day!' ejaculated Arty Kane.

'Just as I'm generally sat down comfortably to lunch!' Miles Childwick grumbled.

'Just when I'm settling down to work after breakfast!' moaned Arty.

They were waiting in the sitting-room at Harriet Street. It was 2.15 in the afternoon. A hansom stood in the street; they had chartered it, according to orders received.

'What does she want us for?' asked Arty.

'A wanton display of dominion, in all likelihood,' suggested Miles gloomily.

'I'm not under her dominion,' objected Arty, who was for the moment devoted to a girl in the country.

'I've always maintained that you were no true poet,' said Miles disagreeably.

Peggy burst in on them—a Peggy raised, as it seemed, to some huge power of even the normal Peggy. She carried a lean little leather bag.

'Is the cab there?' she cried.

'All things in their order. We are here,' Miles reminded her with dignity.

'We've no time to lose,' Peggy announced. 'We've two places to go to, and we've got to be back here by a certain time—and I hope we shall bring somebody with us.'

'In the hansom?' asked Arty resignedly.

'In two hansoms—at least you know what I mean,' said Peggy.

'Isn't she a picture, Arty? Dear me, I beg your pardon, Miss Ryle. I didn't observe your presence. What happens to have painted you red to-day?'

'I'm in a terrible fright about—about something, all the same. Now come along. One of you is to get on one side of me and the other on the other; and you're to guard me. Do you see?'

'Orders, Arty!'

They ranged themselves as they were commanded, and escorted Peggy downstairs.

'Doesn't the hansom present a difficulty?' asked Arty.

'No. I sit in the middle, leaning back; you sit on each side, leaning forward.'

'Reversing the proper order of things, Miles——'

'In order to intercept the dagger of the assassin, Arty. And where to, General?'

'The London and County Bank, Trafalgar Square,' said Peggy, with an irrepressible gurgle.

'By the memory of my mother, I swear it was no forgery! 'Twas but an unaccustomed pen,' murmured Miles.

'I am equal to giving the order,' declared Arty proudly; he gave it with a flourish.

'How soon are we to have a look-in, Peggy?'

'Hush! She's killed another uncle!'

When the world smiled Peggy Ryle laughed aloud. It smiled to-day.

'See me as far as the door of the bank and wait outside,' she commanded, when she recovered articulate gravity.

Their external gloom deepened; they were enjoying themselves immensely. Peggy's orders were precisely executed.

'Present it with a firm countenance,' Miles advised, as she left them at the entrance. 'Confidence, but no bravado!'

'It is no longer a capital offence,' said Arty encouragingly. 'You won't be hanged in silk knee-breeches, like Mr. Fauntleroy.'

Peggy marched into the bank. She opened the lean little bag, and took forth a slip of paper. This she handed to a remarkably tall and prim young man behind the counter. He spoilt his own effect by wearing spectacles, but accuracy is essential in a bank.

He looked at the amount on the cheque; then he looked at Peggy. The combined effect seemed staggering. He took off his spectacles, wiped them, and replaced them with an air of meaning to see clearly this time. He turned the cheque over. 'Margaret Ryle' met him in bold and decided characters. Tradition came to his rescue.

'How will you take it?' he asked.

Peggy burst out joyously: 'It's really all right, then?'

The prim clerk almost jumped. 'I—I presume so,' he stammered, and fled precipitately from the first counter to the third.

Peggy waited in some anxiety; old prepossessions were strong on her. After all, to write a cheque is one thing, to have it honoured depends on a variety of circumstances.

'Quite correct,' said the clerk, returning. He was puzzled; he hazarded a suggestion: 'Do you—er—wish to open——?'

'Notes, please,' said Peggy.

He opened a drawer with many compartments.

'Hundreds!' cried Peggy suddenly. She explained afterwards that she had wanted as much 'crackle' as the little bag would hold.

The clerk licked his forefinger. 'One—two—three—four——'

'Why should he ever stop?' thought Peggy, looking on with the sensation a millionaire might have if he could keep his freshness.

'Thank you very much,' she beamed, with a gratitude almost obtrusive, as she put the notes in the bag. She was

aware that it is not correct to look surprised when your friends' cheques are honoured, but she was not quite able to hold the feeling in repression.

Her bodyguard flung away half-consumed cigarettes and resigned themselves to their duties. A glance at the little bag showed that it had grown quite fat.

'Be very, very careful of me now,' ordered Peggy, as she stepped warily towards the hansom.

'There are seventy thousand thieves known to the police,' said Arty.

'Which gives one an idea of the mass of undiscovered crime in London,' added Miles. 'Now where to, *mon Général*?'

'346 Cadogan Square,' Peggy told them. 'Oh, how I wish I could have a cigarette!'

Both sympathetically offered to have one for her.

'The smoke will embarrass the assassin's aim,' Miles opined sagely.

Arty broke out in a sudden discovery.

'You're going to Fricker's!' he cried.

'I have an appointment with Mr. Fricker,' said Peggy, with pretended carelessness.

'At last, Arty, I shall see the mansions of the gilt.'

'No, you'll wait outside,' Peggy informed him, with a cruelty spoilt by bubbling mirth.

'Is that where we're to pick up the other passenger?' asked Arty.

'You talk as if everything was so very easy!' said Peggy rather indignantly.

'Being anywhere near a bank always has that effect on me,' he apologised.

'Now, one on each side—and be careful,' Peggy implored as the cab stopped in Cadogan Square. 'If anything happened now——!' Her tongue and her imagination failed.

'If you've got any money, you'll leave it there,' Miles prophesied, pointing at the Fricker door.

'Shall I?' cried Peggy in joyous defiance, as she sprang from the cab.

'Mayn't we even sit in the hall?' wailed Arty.

'Wait outside,' she commanded, with friendly curtness.

The door closed on her, the butler and footman showing her in with an air of satisfied expectancy.

'Who's to pay the cab?' exclaimed Arty, smitten with a sudden apprehension.

'Don't you remember being reviewed under the heading of "The Young Ravens"?' asked Miles, a little unkindly, but with a tranquil trust in the future.

That answer might not have satisfied the cabman. It closed the question for Arty Kane. They linked arms and walked up and down the square, discussing Shakespeare's habit of indulging in soliloquy. 'Which is bad art, but good business,' Miles pronounced. Of course Arty differed.

'The study, if you please, miss,' said the butler to Peggy Ryle. She followed him across the fawn-coloured mat which had once proved itself to possess such detective qualities.

Rooms change their aspects as much as faces; he who looks brings to each his own interpretation, and sees himself as much as that on which he gazes. The study was very different now to Peggy from what it had seemed on her previous entry. Very possibly Daniel experienced much the same variety of estimate touching the Lions' Den before he went in and after he came out.

Fricker appeared. He had lunched abstemiously, as was his wont, but daintily, as was Mrs. Fricker's business. He expected amusement; neither his heart nor his digestion was likely to be disturbed. An appeal for pity from Peggy Ryle's lips seemed to promise the maximum of enjoyment combined with the minimum of disturbance to business.

'So you've come back, Miss Ryle?' He gave her his lean, dry, strong hand.

'I told you I might,' she nodded, as she sat down in her old seat, opposite to his arm-chair.

'You've got the money?' His tone was one of easy pleasant mockery.

'It's no use trying to—to beat you down, I suppose?' asked Peggy, with an expression of exaggerated woe.

But he was too sharp for her. He did not fall into her artless trap. He was lighting his cigar, but he broke off the operation (it was not often that he had been known to do that), and leant across the table towards her.

'My God, child, have you got the money?' he asked her in a sort of excitement.

'Yes, yes, yes!' she broke out. Had not that fact been bottled up in her for hours? His question cut the wire. A metaphor derived from champagne is in no sort inappropriate.

'You've got it? Where have you got it from?'

'Your principle is not to ask that, Mr. Fricker.'

'He must be very fond of you.'

'You're utterly wrong—and rather vulgar,' said Peggy Ryle.

'On the table with it!' laughed Fricker.

She threw the little bag across the table. 'Oh, and have you a cigarette, Mr. Fricker?' she implored.

Fricker gave a short laugh, and pushed a silver box across to her. She leant back in an extraordinary perfection of pleasure.

'There are a lot of these notes,' he said. 'Are cheques out of fashion, Miss Ryle?'

'You're so suspicious,' she retorted. Apart from difficulties about a banking account, she would not have missed handling the notes for worlds.

He counted them carefully. 'Correct!' he pronounced.

'And here's your letter!' she cried, producing it from her pocket; the action was a veritable *coup de théâtre*.

'Oh, I remember my letter,' he said with a smile—and a brow knit in vexation. Then he looked across the table at her. 'I'd have betted ten to one against it,' he remarked.

'You underrate the odds,' Peggy told him in a triumph

that really invited Nemesis. 'I'd have betted a thousand to one when I left your house.'

'You're a wonderful girl,' said Fricker. 'How the devil did you do it?'

She grew sober for a moment. 'I'm ashamed of how I did it.' Then she burst out again victoriously: 'But I'd do it again, Mr. Fricker!'

'You have all the elements of greatness,' said he, with a gravity that was affected and yet did not seem entirely pretence. 'You've got three thousand five hundred pounds out of somebody ——'

'I've got four thousand,' interrupted Peggy.

'But five hundred was ——'

'That's not there! That's kept for me. That's the most splendid part of it all!' In that indeed seemed to her to lie the finest proof of victory. The rest might have been shame; that her five hundred lay intact meant change of heart. She had not pressed her five hundred on Airey Newton. There are times when everything should be taken, as there are when all should be given; her instinct had told her that.

Fricker smiled again; his deft fingers parted the notes into two uneven heaps. The fingers seemed to work of their own accord and to have eyes of their own, for his eyes did not leave Peggy Ryle's face.

'Is the man in love with you?' He could not help returning to that explanation.

'Not a farthing, if he had been!' cried Peggy.

'Then he's an old man, or a fool.'

'Why can't I be angry with you?' she cried in an amused despair. 'Are—are greed and—nonsense the only things you know?'

'Are you finding new words for love?' he asked with a sneer.

Peggy laughed. 'That's really not bad,' she admitted candidly. Under the circumstances she did not grudge Fricker a verbal victory. The poor man was badly beaten; let him have his gibe!

He had made his two heaps of notes—a larger and a smaller; his hand wavered undecidedly over them.

'I can trust you to do what you said you would?' she asked suddenly.

'No less—and no more. That's an essential part of my policy,' he assured her.

'And Mrs. Trevalla is free of Glowing Stars? And you'll tell her what you promised?'

'I'll take them over, with the liability. Yes, and I'll tell her.'

He spoke rather absently; his mind seemed to be on something else. When he spoke again, there was an odd—perhaps an unprecedented—embarrassment in his manner.

'I see my way to doing something with Glowing Stars. Money must go into it—the calls must be paid—but I think some of the money might come out again.' He looked at Peggy; he saw her gloriously triumphant eyes, her cheeks flushed with the intoxication of achievement. The impulse was on him to exalt her more. 'I should have done very well if I'd bargained with you for three thousand.'

'It would have seemed almost as impossible. And you wouldn't! You wanted more than market value for your pound of flesh!'

He pushed the smaller of the two heaps that he had made across to her with a swift motion of his hand; the hand trembled a little, but his voice was hard and dry.

'Take back the extra thousand and call it square, Miss Ryle,' said he.

Peggy laid down her cigarette and stared at the heap of notes he pushed across to her.

'What?' she exclaimed in the despair of blank astonishment; she could not grasp the idea.

'Take those back. I shall do very well with these.'

He took up his cigar again, and this time he lit it. To Peggy the room seemed to go round.

'Why do you do that?' she demanded.

'On my word, I don't know. Your infernal pluck, I think,' he said in a puzzled tone.

'I won't have it. It was a bargain.'

'It's not your money, you may remember.'

Peggy had forgotten that.

'It might be a pleasant surprise to—to your friend,' he went on. 'And, if you'll let me do it, it will, Miss Ryle, be rather a pleasant change to me.'

'Why do you do it?' she asked again.

He made her an odd answer—very odd, to come from him. 'Because of the look in your eyes, my dear.'

His tone was free from all offence now; he spoke as a father might. If his words surprised her to wonder, he had no better understanding of hers.

'You too, you too!' she whispered, and the eyes which had moved him grew misty.

'Come, don't refuse me,' he said. 'Take it back to your friend. He'll find a use for it.'

He seemed to touch a spring in her, to give her a cue.

'Yes, yes!' she assented eagerly. 'Perhaps there would be a use for it. Do you give it me? Freely, freely?'

'Freely,' answered Fricker. 'And all you want shall be said to Mrs. Trevalla.'

Peggy opened her bag and began to put the notes in; but she looked still at Fricker.

'Did you ever think of anything like this?' she asked in a new burst of confidence.

'No, I didn't,' he answered, with a brusque laugh.

'You like doing it?'

'Well, was there any compulsion, Miss Ryle?'

'I shall take it,' she said, 'and I thank you very much.'

'I should have been distressed if you hadn't taken it,' said he.

Peggy knew that he spoke truth, strange as the truth might be. She had an impulse to laugh, an impulse to cry. Fricker's quiet face quelled both in her.

'And that finishes our business, I suppose?' he asked.

'It's understood that you don't worry Trix any more?'

'Henceforward Mrs. Trevalla ceases to exist for me.' He was really quite in the same tale with Mrs. Bonfill and society at large.

His declaration seemed to amuse Peggy. 'Oh, well, that's putting it rather strongly, perhaps,' she murmured.

'Not a bit!' retorted Fricker, with his confident contemptuousness.

'You can never tell how you may run up against people,' remarked Peggy with a mature sagacity.

He leant back, looking at her. 'I've learnt to think that your observations have a meaning, Miss Ryle.'

'Yes,' Peggy confessed. 'But I don't exactly know——' She frowned a moment, and then smiled with the brightness of a new idea. 'Where's your daughter, Mr. Fricker?'

'Connie's in her room.' He did not add that, by way of keeping vivid the memory of moral lessons, he had sent her there on Peggy's arrival.

'Do you think she'd give me a cup of tea?'

It was rather early for tea. 'Well, I daresay she would,' smiled Fricker. 'I shall hear what's up afterwards?'

'Yes, I'm sure you will,' promised Peggy.

He sent her under escort to the drawing-room, and directed that Connie should be told to join her. Then he returned to his study and began the letter which he had to write to Trix Trevalla. He fulfilled his obligation loyally, although he had no pity for Trix, and was sorely tempted to give her a dig or two. He resisted this temptation when he remembered that to do what he said he would was an essential part of his policy, and that, if he failed in it, Peggy Ryle would come again and want to know the meaning of it; at which thought he raised his brows and smiled in an amused puzzle. So he told Trix that Glowing Stars gave promise of a new development, and, though he could not offer her any price for her shares, he would take them off her hands for a nominal

consideration, and hold her free from the liability. 'Thus,' he ended, 'closing all accounts between us.'

'She was a fool, and my wife was a fool, and I suppose I was a fool too,' he mused. A broader view came to his comfort. 'A man's got to be a bit of a fool in some things if he wants to live comfortably at home,' he reflected. He could not expect the weaker sex (such undoubtedly would have been his description) to rise to the pure heights where he dwelt, where success in business was its own reward and the victorious play of brains triumph enough. 'But anyhow we backed the wrong horse in Trix Trevalla,' he had to acknowledge finally.

Before he had sealed the letter, Connie burst into the room. Fricker prepared to say something severe—these unlicensed intrusions were a sore offence. But the sight of his daughter stopped him. She was dressed in the height of smartness; she had her hat on and was buttoning her gloves; her cheeks were red, and excitement shone in her eyes. On the whole it looked as though she were clearing the decks for action.

'I'm going back to tea with Miss Ryle,' she announced.

He rose, and stood with his back to the fireplace.

'Well, she's a very nice friend for you to have, Connie.' There was a flavour of mockery in his tone.

'You know as well as I do that there's no question of that. But Mrs. Trevalla's living with her now.'

'I thought your mother and you had agreed to drop Mrs. Trevalla?'

Connie was not in the mood to notice or to trouble about his subtly malicious sarcasms.

'I asked Beaufort Chance to come here to-day,' she went on, 'and he told me he had to be in the City all the afternoon.'

'Aren't these things in your mother's department, Connie?'

'No, in yours. I want you to back me up. He's going to tea at four o'clock at Miss Ryle's—to meet Mrs. Trevalla.'

'Miss Ryle told you that? And she wants you to go with her?'

'Yes. You see what it means?'

'Why, Connie, you're looking quite dangerous.'

'I'm going with her,' Connie announced, finishing off the last glove-button viciously. 'At least I am if you'll back me up.'

'How?' he asked. He was amused at her in this mood, and rather admired her too.

'Well, first, you must see me through with mamma, if—if anything comes out about what's been happening. You know Beaufort wouldn't stick at giving me away if he wanted to get even with me.'

'You're probably right as to that,' agreed Fricker, licking his cigar.

'So you must tell mamma that it had your approval, and not let her be nasty to me. You can manage that, if you like, you know.'

'I daresay, I daresay. Is there any other diversion for your idle old father?'

'Yes. You must back me up with Beaufort. I believe he's dangling after Mrs. Trevalla again.' Connie's eyes flashed with threatenings of wrath.

'On the quiet?'

Connie nodded emphatically.

'Hardly the square thing,' said Fricker, smiling in an abused patience.

'Are you going to stand it? He's made fierce love to me.'

'Yes, I know something about that, Connie. And you're fond of him, eh?'

'Yes, I am,' she declared defiantly. 'And I won't let that woman take him away from me.'

'What makes you think she'd have him?'

'Oh, she'd have him! But I don't mean her to get the chance.'

Fricker liked spirit of all sorts; if he had approved of

Peggy's, he approved of his daughter's too. Moreover his great principle was at stake once more, and must be vindicated again; he must insist on fair play. If what Connie attributed to Beaufort Chance were true, it was by no means fair play. His mind briefly reviewed how he stood towards Beaufort; the answer was that Beaufort hung on him, and could not stand alone. He had the gift of seeing just how people were situated; he saw it better than they did themselves, thanks to his rapid intuition and comprehensive grasp of business affairs. He had set Beaufort Chance on horseback—financial horseback; if he willed, he could pull him down again; at the least he could make his seat most uncomfortable and precarious.

'We should be able to manage him between us, should we, after the event as well as before?'

'You help me to manage him before—I'll manage him myself afterwards,' said Connie.

'Good girl! Say what you like. I'll back you up. Bring him to me, if need be.'

Connie darted at him and kissed him. 'Don't say anything before Miss Ryle,' she whispered. 'It's just that I'm going out to tea.'

When they reached the hall, where Peggy was waiting in triumphant composure, Connie Fricker lived up to the spirit of this caution by discarding entirely her aggressive plainness of speech and her combative air. She minced with excessive gentility as she told Miss Ryle that she was ready to go with her; then she flew off to get a gold-headed parasol. Peggy sat and smiled at Mr. Fricker.

'She's going to have tea with you?' asked Fricker.

'Isn't it kind of her?' beamed Peggy.

Fricker respected diplomacy. 'The kindness is on your side,' he replied politely; but his smile told Peggy all the truth. She gave a laugh of amusement mingled with impatient anticipation.

Connie came running back. 'You'll tell mamma where I've gone, won't you?' she asked, her eyes reminding her

father of one-half of his duty. 'Oh, and possibly Mr. Chance will be here at dinner.' She managed to recall the other half.

Fricker nodded; Peggy rose with an admirable unconsciousness.

'Hold your bag tight, Miss Ryle,' Fricker advised, with a gleam in his eye as he shook hands.

'That's all right. I'm well looked after,' said Peggy, as the servant opened the door.

Two hansoms were waiting; in each sat a young man smoking a cigarette. At the sight of Peggy they leapt out; at the sight of the gorgeous young woman who accompanied Peggy they exchanged one swift glance and threw away the cigarettes. Introductions were made, Fricker standing and looking on, the butler peering over Fricker's shoulder.

'What time is it?' inquired Peggy.

'Quarter to four,' said Arty Kane.

'Oh, we must be quick, or—or tea'll be cold!' She turned to Miles Childwick. 'Will you go with Miss Fricker, Miles? Arty, take me. Come along. Good-bye, Mr. Fricker.'

She kissed her hand to Fricker and jumped in; Arty followed. Miles, with a queer look of fright on his face, lifted his hat and indicated the remaining hansom.

'It's rather unconventional, isn't it?' giggled Connie, gathering her skirts carefully away from the wheel.

'Allow me,' begged Miles in a sepulchrally grave tone.

He saw her in without damage, raised his hat again to Fricker, got in, and sat down well on the other side of the cab. He was of opinion that Peggy had let him in shamefully.

'I hope it's a quiet horse, or I shall scream,' said Connie.

'I hope it is,' agreed Miles most heartily. What his part would be if she screamed he dared not think; he said afterwards that the colours of her garments did quite enough screaming on their own account.

Fricker watched them drive off and then returned to his

study thoughtfully. But he was not engrossed in problems of finance, in the possibilities of Glowing Stars and of minimising the claims they would make. He was not even thinking of the odd way things had turned out in regard to Trix Trevalla, nor of how he had pledged himself to deal with Beaufort Chance. The only overt outcome of his meditations was the remark, addressed once again to his study walls:—

'I'm not sure that Connie isn't a bit too lively in her dress.'

The various influences which produced this illuminating doubt it would be tedious to consider. And the doubt had no practical result. He did not venture so much as to mention it to Connie or to Mrs. Fricker.

CHAPTER XXI

THE WHIP ON THE PEG

Of that drive with Connie Fricker Miles Childwick had, in the after-time, many tales to tell. Truth might claim the inspiration, an artistic intellect perfected them. 'She said things to which no gentleman should listen in a hansom cab, but the things she said were nothing to the things she looked as if she was going to say. In a hansom! No screen between you and a scrutinising public, Mrs. John!' That was the first stage. In the second he had invented for poor Connie all the sayings which he declared her expression to suggest. Whatever the exact facts, while he forgave Peggy Ryle everything else, he did not cease to harbour malice on account of that ride. Connie thought him nice, but rather slow. His must be the blame, since it is agreed that in such cases the man should adapt himself.

The work of the bodyguard was done; it was disbanded with a gracious invitation to supper. Peggy flew up the stairs ahead of her guest. There was a great question to be solved.

'The gentleman has come, miss,' said the charwoman.

'And Mrs. Trevalla?'

'I told him Mrs. Trevalla would be in directly.'

'And where is she?

'She's still in her room, I think, miss.'

Peggy turned triumphant eyes on her companion. 'Now then, Miss Fricker!' said she. 'That's the door! I shall go and keep Trix quiet. That's the door!' She pointed encouragingly, if rather imperiously, to the sitting-room.

'I'm not afraid,' laughed Connie, putting her hat straight and giving a rattle to her bangles. But there was a ring of agitation in her voice, and in her heart she half-regretted the dismissal of the bodyguard. Still, she had pluck.

She swept in with the sustaining consciousness of a highly dramatic entrance. To come in well is often half the battle.

'You here! The devil!' exclaimed Beaufort Chance.

'Mr. Chance! Well, I declare!' said Connie. 'And alone too!' She looked round suspiciously, as though Trix might perhaps be under the table. 'Well, I suppose Miss Ryle won't be long taking off her things.'

Beaufort already suspected a plot, but, his first surprise over, he would not plead guilty to being an object that invited one.

'I got away earlier than I expected,' he told her, 'and looked in here on my way to Cadogan Square. There was no chance of finding you at home so early.'

'And there was a chance of finding Mrs. Trevalla?' She sat down opposite him, showing her teeth in a mocking smile. His confusion and the weakness of his plea set her courage firmly on its feet.

'I don't know whether there was or not. She's not here, you see.'

'Oh, I'll amuse you till she comes!'

'I sha'n't wait for her long.'

'I sha'n't stay long either. You can drive me back home, can't you?'

He was pitifully caught, and had not the adroitness to hide his sense of it. Perhaps he had been cruelly used. When he had written to Trix, saying he meant to come again and asking for a date, it was hardly fair of Peggy, performing the office of amanuensis for Trix, to say that Mrs. Trevalla saw few visitors, but that this particular day (on which Peggy was to visit Fricker) would be the best chance of seeing her. Such language might be non-committal; it was undoubtedly misleading. He had found in it a sign

that Trix was yielding, coming to a sensible frame of mind, recognising what seemed to him so obvious—the power he had over her and her attraction towards him. In his heart he believed that he held both these women, Trix and Connie, in his hand, and could do as he liked with them; thus he would cajole and conciliate Connie (he thought kisses would not lose their efficacy, nor that despotic air either) while he made Trix his own—for towards her lay his stronger inclination. To secure her would be his victory over all the sneerers, over Mervyn, and—the greatest came last—over herself. But, however clever we are, there is a point at which things may fall out too perversely. If Connie came by chance, this acme of bad luck was reached; if by design, then he had miscalculated somewhere.

'You're not greeting me very enthusiastically,' remarked Connie. 'You don't sit stock-still and say you won't stay long when I come to you in the drawing-room at home!'

'Nonsense! That girl may be in here any minute.'

'Well, and mamma might come in any minute at home—which would be much worse. After all, what would she matter? You're not ashamed of me, I suppose?'

Assumption is a valuable device in argument; Connie was using it skilfully. She assumed that she was first in his thoughts, and did not charge him with preferring another; let him explain that—if he dared.

'Nonsense!' he repeated fretfully. 'But I can't play the fool now. I've come to see Mrs. Trevalla on business. Isn't there another room?'

'No; and I thought papa did all the business there was with Mrs. Trevalla.'

He had sat down near the table; she came and perched herself on it. Intimidation must probably be the main weapon, but she was alive to the importance of reinforcing it.

'He thinks he does,' she went on significantly.

'Oh, it's a small matter. It won't do him any harm. And I'm a free agent, I suppose?'

'You're free enough anyhow, pretty often,' Connie admitted.

'You've never objected,' he snarled, his temper getting out of hand.

'Well, no. I knew I had to do with a gentleman.'

Kisses might be out of place, even dangerous in view of a possible interruption; but there was the despotic air. Now seemed the minute for it.

'Don't you talk nonsense, child,' he said. 'If I've treated you kindly, it doesn't entitle you to take that tone. And get off that table.'

'I'm very comfortable here,' remarked Connie.

'It doesn't look respectable.'

'What, not with you and me? There's nobody here, is there?'

'Stop playing the fool,' he commanded brusquely. 'What's the matter with you to-day?'

'I'm in ripping spirits to-day, Beaufort. Can't you guess why?'

'I don't believe you came here to see Peggy Ryle at all,' he broke out.

'Never mind why I came here.'

'Have you got an idea that you've done something clever?'

'Never mind. I've awfully good news, Beaufort.'

'They may be listening at the door.' His uneasiness was pitiful.

'It wouldn't matter. Everybody'll know soon,' said Connie consolingly.

'What the deuce are you talking about?' he growled.

She bent forward towards him with a striking, if rather overdone, air of joyous confusion.

'I've spoken to papa, Beaufort,' she whispered.

Startled out of pretence, he sprang to his feet with an oath. His look was very ugly, he glared threateningly. Connie braced her courage and did not quail.

'I know I ought to have asked you,' she admitted with a

smile that belied her professed penitence, 'but I caught him in such a beautiful humour that I had to take advantage of it. So I told him everything. I just confessed everything, Beaufort! Of course he scolded me—it hasn't been quite right, has it?—but he was very kind. He said that, since we were engaged, he'd forgive me and make mamma forgive me too.' She paused before her climax. 'I think that he's really simply awfully pleased.'

'You've told your father that you're engaged to me? You know it's a damned lie.'

Connie's eyes gleamed dangerously, but she kept admirably cool.

'Well, I told him that you'd said you loved me, and that you always kissed me when we were alone, and called me your little Connie, and so on, you know. And papa said that he presumed from all that that we were engaged.'

'Well?' he muttered savagely.

'And I said that of course I presumed so too.'

It was spoken with the innocence of the dove, but it put Beaufort Chance in a very awkward position; the reference is not to his sensibilities but to his tactics. Connie's dexterity forced him to a broad alternative—submission or open war. She deprived him of any half-way house, any compromise by which cajolery and kisses would serve in place of a promise and an obligation. She did not leave the matter there; she jumped down from the table and put her arm on his shoulder—indeed, half-way round his neck. 'You must have meant me to; and it made me so happy to—to feel that I was yours, Beaufort.'

To this pass his shifty dealings had brought him, even as in public affairs they had forbidden him a career, and in business had condemned him to a sort of outlawry, although an outlawry tempered by riches. He was in an extremity; his chance of Trix was at stake, his dominion over Connie herself was challenged. He saw the broad alternative, and he chose open war.

'It's all a very pretty trick of yours, my dear,' he sneered

throwing her arm off him none too gently; 'but a man doesn't marry every girl he kisses, especially not when she's so ready to be kissed as some people we know. You can explain it to your father any way you like, but you're not going to bluff me.'

'I see why you came here now,' said Connie coolly. 'You came to make love to Trix Trevalla. Well, you can't, that's all.'

'That's for Mrs. Trevalla to say, not for you.'

'I don't expect Mrs. Trevalla'll show up at all,' remarked Connie, leaning against the table again.

'That's the little plan, is it?' He gave a jerk of his head. 'By Jove, I see! That hussy of a Ryle girl's in it!'

'I don't know who's in it; you seem rather out of it,' smiled Connie.

'I am, am I? We'll see. So Mrs. Trevalla won't show, won't she? That's hardly final, is it? She's on the premises, I rather fancy.'

'Going to force your way into her bedroom? Oh, Beaufort!'

'You'd be mightily shocked, wouldn't you?' He moved towards the door; his purpose was only half-formed, but he wished her to think it was absolute.

'I don't mind; but I'm sure papa and mamma would. I don't think they'd like you for a son-in-law after that.'

'Then we should all be pleased.'

'Or perhaps for a partner either.'

He turned round sharply, and came back a step or two towards her.

'What do you mean by that?' he asked slowly.

'I don't suppose papa would care to have anything to do with a man who trifled with his daughter's affections.' Connie stuck loyally to the old phrases.

He was full in front of her now and looking hard at her.

'You little devil! I believe you've squared him,' said he.

Connie, well on the table again, put her arms akimbo,

stuck her legs out in front of her straight from the knee, and laughed in his face.

'If you're going into Mrs. Trevalla's room, you might ask her if, from her experience, she thinks it wise to quarrel with papa.'

'I'm not a woman and a fool.'

'Oh, you know your own business best, Beaufort!'

It was sorely against the grain, but he shirked his open war; he tried coaxing.

'Come, be reasonable, Connie. You're a sensible girl. I mean all that's square, but——'

'I mean that if you wait here after I've gone, or go now and see Trix Trevalla, I'll never speak to you again. And papa—— Well, as I say, you know your own business best about that.'

Her cool certainty, her concentration on one purpose, gave her all the advantage over him with his divided counsels, his inconsistent desires, his efforts to hedge. Again she pinned him to a choice.

'What do you want?' he asked curtly.

'I want you to take me home to Cadogan Square.' That was hard and business-like, and bore for him all the significance that she meant to put into it. Then her voice grew lower and her large eyes turned on him with a different expression. 'We can have a really friendly talk about it there.' She meant to beat him, but she was highly content to soften the submission by all means in her power. She would not hesitate about begging his forgiveness, provided the spoils of victory were hers—in the fashion of some turbulent vassal after defying his feeble overlord.

Beaufort read it all well enough. He saw that she liked him and was ready to be pleasant: his dream of mastery vanished from before his eyes. He might have broken Trix Trevalla's proud but sensitive spirit; Miss Connie's pliant pride and unpliant purposes were quite different things to deal with. He knew that in effect, whatever the forms were, he submitted if he took her to Cadogan Square.

Henceforward his lot was with the Frickers—and not as their master either.

The truth came home to him with cutting bitterness. He had been able to say to himself that he might use Fricker, but that he was very different from Fricker; that he flirted with Connie, but that his wife would have to be very different from her. He had to give up, too, all thought of Trix Trevalla. Or he must face the alternative and be at war with Fricker. Had he the courage? Had he the strength? He stood looking gloomily at Connie.

'You're a fool, Beaufort,' she told him plainly, with a glittering smile. 'I'm sure you seemed fond enough of me. Why shouldn't we be very jolly? You think I'm nasty now, but I'm not generally, am I?' She coaxed him with the look that she would have said was her most 'fetching.' To do her justice, a more expressive word for the particular variety of glance is hard to find.

At this moment Peggy Ryle came out of Trix's room (where she had beguiled the time in idle conversation), shut the door carefully behind her, crossed the passage, and entered the sitting-room. The time Connie had estimated as sufficient for the interview had elapsed.

'Oh, Mr. Chance, I'm sorry! Trix has such a headache that she can't come in. She has tried, but standing up or moving——' Peggy threw out her hands in an expressive gesture. 'That's what kept me,' she added apologetically to Connie. 'I hope you've amused one another all this time?'

The plot was plain now; the bulk of Beaufort's resentment turned on Peggy. What was the use of that? Peggy had no fear of him. She was radiantly invulnerable.

'I'm sorry she's so seedy.' He hesitated; he longed to see Trix, even if it were no more than to see her and to give her a parting blow. 'Perhaps you'll let me send a note in, to say what my business is? It's pressing, and she might make an effort to see me for——'

'I'm afraid I must go,' Connie interrupted. 'I promised to be home.'

'Must you really? I suppose the cab's waiting.'

'You mustn't bother poor Mrs. Trevalla with business now, must he, Miss Ryle? It must wait for another day. You were coming to Cadogan Square, weren't you? I'll take you with me.'

He looked from one to the other. Never was man in a more hopeless corner. Nothing would have pleased him so much as to knock their heads together. Connie was imitating Peggy's external unconsciousness of anything remarkable in the situation as well as she could.

'We mustn't stay. Mrs. Trevalla must want you,' pursued Connie.

'Oh, I can leave her for just a few minutes,' Peggy assured her, with an anxious look at the clock.

'Good-bye, Miss Ryle,' said Connie, giving Peggy's hand a hearty squeeze. She passed on towards the door and opened it. Holding it ajar, she looked round and waited for Beaufort Chance. For an instant he stood where he was. The idea of rebellion was still in him. But his spirit failed. He came up to Peggy and sullenly bade her farewell.

'Good-bye,' said Peggy in a low voice. Its tone struck him as odd; when he looked in her eyes he saw a touch of compassion. It flashed across him that she understood what he was feeling, that she saw how his acts had brought him lower than his nature need have been brought—or at least that she was sorry that this fate, and nothing less than this, must be held to be justice.

'Good-bye, Miss Ryle. My regrets to Mrs. Trevalla. I hope for another opportunity. Now I'm ready, Miss Fricker, and most delighted to have the chance.'

At all times let the proprieties be sacred!

That is, let them be observed in the presence of third parties—especially if those parties have brought us to humiliation. They are not so exacting in a vehicle that holds only two.

'Your turn to-day; mine some other day, Connie,' said

Beaufort Chance, as he sullenly settled himself in the cab.

'Oh, don't talk bosh, and don't sulk. You've found out that I'm not a fool. Is there any harm in that?' She turned to him briskly. 'There are just two ways of taking this,' she told him. 'One is to be bullied into it by papa. The other is to do it pleasantly. Since there's no way not to do it, which of those two do you think best?'

'Did you mean it all the time?' he asked, sullen still, but curious.

'As soon as I began to be really gone on you,' she answered him. The phrase is not classical, but she used it, and used it with a very clear purpose. 'You don't suppose I like being—being disagreeable, and seeming to have—to have to force you to what you'd always let me understand you wanted? A girl has some self-respect, Beaufort.'

'Some girls have got a deuced good set of brains, anyhow,' he said, feeling for her some of the admiration that her father's clear purposes and resolute pursuit of them always claimed for him.

'Do you suppose' (Connie's face looked out of the other side of the cab) 'that if I hadn't been awfully fond of you——?'

He believed her, which was not strange; what she said was near enough to the truth to be rather strange. Yet it was not incongruous in her. And she seized a good moment for confessing it. If he would choose the pleasant way of accepting the inevitable, it should be made very pleasant to him. Nor was she indifferent as to which way he chose. She had her father in reserve, and would invoke his help if need be; but she hated to think of his smile while he gave it. Suddenly, under the board of the cab, she put her hand into Beaufort Chance's and gave his a squeeze.

He surrendered; but he kept up a little bit of pretence to the last. Connie let him keep it up, and humoured him in it.

'All right. But I'll tell you what I think of your little game when we're alone together!'

'Oh, I say, you frighten me!' cried Connie tactfully. 'You won't be cruel, will you, Beaufort dear?'

She would have made an excellent Mayor of the Palace to a blustering but easily managed king.

He had chosen the pleasant way, and verily all things were made pleasant to him. Mrs. Fricker was archly maternal. A mother's greeting for him, an indulgent mother's forgiveness for Connie's secrecy. No more than a ponderously playful 'Naughty child!' redeemed in an instant by 'But we could always trust her!' Not thus always Mrs. Fricker towards Connie and her diversions, as Connie's anxiety in the past well testified. But there, an engagement in the end does make a difference—if it is a desirable one. It would seem dangerous to divorce morality and prudence, since the apostles of each have ever been supremely anxious to prove that it coincided with, if it did not even include, the other; let us hope that they seek rather to excuse their opponents than to fortify themselves.

Fricker too was benevolent; he hinted at millions; he gave Beaufort to understand that while a partner or associate was one thing, a member of the family would be quite another; crumbs from the rich man's table compared with 'All that I have is thine' was about the difference. It is true that Fricker smiled here and there, and just at first had seemed to telegraph something to his daughter's wide-awake eyes, and to receive a reply that increased his cordiality. What of that? Who cares for a whip if it be left hanging on the peg? It is at worst a hint which any wise and well-bred slave will notice, but ignore. Not a reminder of it came from Fricker, unless in a certain far-away reflectiveness of smile. He had spent an hour that day in the task of finding out how entirely he held Beaufort in the hollow of his hand. The time was not wasted—besides, it was a recreation. But he did not wish to have to shut his fist and squeeze; he preferred at all times that things should go pleasantly, and

his favourite moral lessons be inculcated by the mild uses of persuasion. 'Now you're one of us,' he told Beaufort, grasping his hand. Well, possibly he glanced at the whip out of the corner of his eye when he was saying that.

And Connie herself? She was the finest diplomatist of the three, for her heart was in the work. So much falsehood comes from no cause as from labelling human folk with a single ticket; a bundle of them might have been adequate to Connie. The time came which Beaufort had threatened—when they were alone as an affianced pair. The thing was done; she had spared no roughness in doing it. Now she set herself to make him content; nor did she force him to retract his threats. Her own mind was divided as to their relations When it came to the point of a clash of wills (to use a phrase consecrated by criticism), she found always that she wished her's to prevail; in lighter questions she was primitive enough to cherish the ideal of herself as a willing slave. If Beaufort had not been able to raise that illusion in her from time to time, she would not have liked him so much, nor gone to such lengths to prove her own ultimate mastery. Almost persuading herself, she almost persuaded him; and in this effort she became pleasant to him again. Thus she compromised between her woman's temperament and her masculine will. If he would accept the compromise as a permanent basis, their union promised to go very smoothly.

'If you'd been like this,' he told her, 'there wouldn't have been any trouble this afternoon.'

She endorsed the monstrous falsehood readily.

'No, it was all my fault. But I was—so terrified of losing you.'

'You tried to threaten me into it!'

He could not be so deluded as to doubt what she had done. But he wanted the forlorn comfort of a brave face over a beaten heart.

'You threatened me too,' whispered Connie.

She broke away from him and took up her old jaunty

attitude—arm on the mantel-piece, foot on the fender—again: there was challenge in the eyes that met his boldly.

'You did want some persuading,' she reminded him.

He laughed. 'Well, Trix Trevalla's a devilish pretty woman—and a bit easier to hold than you.'

'I'm easy enough, if your hand's light. As for her, she'd have worried you to death. She'd have hated you, Beaufort.'

He did not like that, and showed it.

'And I—don't!' Connie went on with a dazzling smile. 'Well, you're staring at me. How do I look?'

So she played her fish, with just enough hint of her power, with just enough submission to the legitimate sway she invited him to exercise. It was all very dexterous; there was probably no other road to her end. If it seems in some ways not attractive—well, we must use the weapons we have or be content to go to the wall. When she bade him good-night—still Mrs. Fricker was strong on reputable hours, and Connie herself assumed a new touch of scrupulousness (she was a free lance no more)—his embrace did not lack ardour. She disengaged herself from his arms with a victorious laugh.

Her mother waited for her, vigilant but approving—just a little anxious too.

'Well, Connie, is he very happy?'

'It's all right, mamma.' Her assurance was jovially impudent. 'I can do just what I like with him!'

'You'll have a job sometimes,' opined Mrs. Fricker.

'That's half the fun.' She thought a moment, and then spoke with a startling candour—with an unceremoniousness which Mrs. Fricker would have reproved twenty-four hours earlier. 'I'm very fond of him,' she said, 'but Beaufort's a funk in the end, you know.' She swung herself off to bed, singing a song. Her title to triumph is not to be denied. Peggy Ryle had furnished the opportunity, but the use of it had been all her own. A natural exultation may excuse the exclamation with which she jumped into bed:

'I knew Mrs. Trevalla wouldn't be in it if I got a fair show!'

Beaufort Chance stayed a while alone in the drawing-room before he went down to join Fricker over a cigar. He had enjoyed Connie's company that night; the truth stood out undeniable. She had made him forget what her company meant and would cost—nay, more, what it would bring him in worldly gain. She had made him forget, or cease to wish for, Trix Trevalla. She had banished the thought of what he had been and once had hoped to be. If she could do that for him, would he be unhappy? For a moment he almost prayed to be always unhappy in the thing which he was now set to do. For after an hour of blindness there came, as often, an hour of illumination almost unnatural. In the light of it he saw one of the worst things that a man can see. Enough of his old self and of his old traditions remained to make his eyes capable of the vision. He knew that the worst in him had been pleased; he saw that to please the worst in him threatened now to become enough. His record was not very good, but had he deserved this? It is useless to impugn the way of things. The knowledge came to him that, as he had more and more sought the low and not the high, so more and more the low had become sufficient to him. The knowledge was very bitter; but with a startled horror he anticipated the time when he would lose it. He had lost so much—public honour, private scruples, delicacy of taste. He had set out with at least a respect for these things and with that share in them which the manner of his life and the standard of his associates imparted to him. They were all gone. He was degraded. He knew that now, and he feared that even the consciousness of it would soon die.

There was no help for it. In such cases there is none, unless a man will forsake all and go naked into the wilderness. To such a violent remedy he was unequal. It did not need Fricker's smooth assumption that all was settled to tell him that all was settled indeed. It did not need

Fricker's welcome to the bosom of the family to tell him that of that family he would now be. Fricker's eulogy of his daughter was unnecessary, since soon to Beaufort too she would seem a meet subject for unstinted praise.

Yet Fricker did not lack some insight into his thoughts.

'I daresay, old fellow,' he remarked, warming his back before the fire—which he liked at nights, whatever the season of the year—'that this isn't quite what you expected when you began life, but, depend upon it, it's very good business. After all, we very few of us get what we think we shall when we set up in the thing. Here am I—and, by Jove, I started life secretary to a Diocesan Benevolent Fund, and wanting to marry the Archdeacon's daughter! Here are you—well, we know all about you, Beaufort, my boy! Old Mervyn hasn't quite done the course he set out to do. Where's our friend Mrs. Trevalla? What's going to happen to pretty Peggy Ryle?' He dropped his coat-tails and shrugged his shoulders. 'Between you and me, and not for the ladies, we take what we can get and try to be thankful. It's a queer business, but you haven't drawn such a bad ticket after all.'

Beaufort Chance took a long pull of whisky-and-soda. The last idea of violent rebellion was gone. Under the easy tones, the comfortably pessimistic doctrine (there is much and peculiar comfort in doctrine of that colour), proceeding from the suave and well-warmed preacher on the hearthrug, there lay a polite intimation of the inevitable. If Fate and the Frickers seemed to mingle and become indistinct in conception, why, so they did in fact. Whose was the whip on the peg—Fate's or Fricker's? And who gives either Fate or Frickers power? Whatever the answer to these questions, Beaufort Chance had no mind that the whip should be taken down.

'I've nothing to complain of,' said he, and drank again.

Fricker watched the gulps with a fatherly smile.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PHILOSOPHY OF IT

'And I think that's an end of any worry about Beaufort Chance!'

It was a heartlessly external way of regarding a fellow-creature's fate, but in relating how Connie Fricker had carried off her prisoner, and how subsequent despatches had confirmed his unconditional submission, Peggy had dealt with the narrative in a comedy vein throughout. Though she showed no gratitude to Beaufort, she owed him some as a conversational resource if in no other capacity; he enabled her to carry off the opening of her interview with Airey in that spirit of sturdy unemotionality which she desired—and was rather doubtful of maintaining. Coinciding in her wish and appreciating the device, Airey had listened with an applauding smile.

Peggy now made cautious approaches to more difficult ground.

'So he's off Trix's mind,' she concluded, sighing with relief. 'And the other thing's off her mind too. She's heard from Mr. Fricker.'

'Ah!' Airey, who had been walking about, turned short round on her and waited.

'Yes, she believes it all. He did it very well. As far as I'm concerned he's behaved most honourably.' Peggy had the air of giving a handsome testimonial. 'She asked me no questions; she never thought I had anything to do with it; she just flew at me with the letter. You can't think what a difference it makes! She holds up her head again.'

'Is it quite fair?' he asked doubtfully.

'Yes, yes, for the present,' Peggy insisted. 'Perhaps she might be told some day.' She looked at him significantly.

'Some day? How do you mean?'

'When she can bear it.' Peggy grew embarrassed as the ground became more difficult. 'If ever other things made her feel that what had happened didn't matter, that now at all events people valued her, or—or that she'd rather owe it to somebody else than to herself or her own luck.'

He did not mistake her meaning, but his face was still clouded; hesitation and struggle hung about him still. Neither by word nor in writing had Peggy ever thanked him for what he had done; since she had kissed his hand and left him, nothing had passed between them till to-day. She guessed his mind; he had done what she asked, but he was still miserable. His misery perhaps made the act more splendid, but it left the future still in shade. How could the shade be taken away?

She gathered her courage and faced the perilous advance.

'You'll have observed,' she said, with a nervous laugh, 'that I didn't exactly press my—my contribution on you. I —I rather want it, Airey.'

'I suppose you do. But that's not your reason—and it wasn't mine,' he answered.

'Is it there still?' She pointed to the safe. He nodded. 'Take it out and give it to me. No, give me just—just twenty-five.'

'You're in a saving mood,' remarked Airey grimly, as he obeyed her.

'Don't shut the safe yet,' she commanded hastily. 'Leave it like that—yes, just half-way. What ogreish old bolts it's got!'

'Why not shut it?' he objected in apparent annoyance. Did the sight of its partial depletion vex him? For before Peggy could go to Fricker's, some of its hoard had gone to Tommy Trent.

'There's something to put in it,' she answered in an eager timid voice. She set her little bag on the table and opened it. 'You gave me too much. Here's some back again.' She held out a bundle of notes. 'A thousand pounds.'

He came slowly across to the table.

'How did you manage that?'

'I don't know. I never thought of it. He just gave them back to me. Here they are. Take them and put them in.'

He looked at them and at her. The old demon stirred in him; he reached out his hand towards them with his old eagerness. He had run over figures in his mind; they made up a round sum—and round sums he had loved. Peggy did not glance at him; her arms were on the table and her eyes studied the cloth. He walked away to the hearthrug and stood silent for a long while. There was no reason why he should not take back his money; no reproach lay in that, it was the obvious and the sensible thing to do. All these considerations the demon duly adduced; the demon had always been a plausible arguer. Airey Newton listened, but his ears were not as amenable as they had been wont to be. He saw through the demon's specious case. Here was the gate by which the demon tried to slip back to the citadel of his heart!

Peggy had expected nothing else than that he would take them at once. In a way it would have given her pleasure to see him thus consoled; she would have understood and condoned the comfort he got, and thought no less of his sacrifice. His hesitation planted in her the hope of a pleasure infinitely finer. The demon's plausible suggestions carried no force at all for her. She saw the inner truth. She had resolved not to look at Airey; under irresistible temptation she raised her eyes to his.

'That's not mine,' he said at last. 'You say Fricker gave it back to you. It's yours, then.'

'Oh, no, that's nonsense! It's yours, of course, Airey.'

'I won't touch it.' He walked across to the safe, banged it to, and locked it with savage decision; the key he flung down on the table. Then he came back to the hearthrug. 'I won't touch it. It's not mine, I say.'

'I won't touch it; it's not mine either,' insisted Peggy.

The despised notes lay on the table between them. Peggy rose and slowly came to him. She took his hands.

'Oh, Airey, Airey!' she said in whispered rapture.

'Bosh! Be business-like. Put them in your bag again.'

'Never!' she laughed softly.

'Then there they lie.' He broke into a laugh. 'And there they would, even if you left me alone with them!'

'Airey, you'll see her soon?'

'What the deuce has that got to do with it?'

'Nothing, nothing!' Her gaiety rose and would not be denied. 'A little mistake of mine! But what are we to do with them?'

'The poor?' he suggested. Peggy felt that prosaic, and shook her head. 'The fire? Only there isn't one. Spills? The butterman?'

'They do crackle so seductively,' sighed Peggy.

'Hush!' said Airey with great severity.

Her heart was very light in her. If he could jest about the trouble, surely the trouble was well-nigh past? Could it be abolished altogether? A sudden inspiration filled her mind; her eyes grew bright in eagerness, and her laugh came full though low.

'How stupid we are! Why, we'll spend them, Airey!'

'What?' That suggestion did startle him.

'This very day.'

'All of them?'

'Every farthing. It'll be glorious!'

'What are we to spend them on?' He looked at them apprehensively.

'Oh, that won't be difficult,' she declared. 'You must just do as I tell you, and I can manage it.'

'Well, I don't know that I could have a better guide.'

'Go and put on your best clothes. You're going out with me.'

'I've got them on,' smiled Airey Newton.

'Oh, I beg your pardon!' cried Peggy in momentary distress. His face reassured her; they both fell to laughing.

'Well, anyhow,' she suggested, as a last resort, 'suppose you brush them?'

Airey had no objection to that, and departed to his room.

Peggy moved about in restless excitement, fired by her idea. 'First for her, and then——' She shook her head at her own audacity. Yet confidence would not die in her. Had she really struck on the way? Had not the demon summoned up all his most seductive arguments just because he was sore afraid? It was madness? 'Yes, madness to cure madness!' cried Peggy in her heart. A gift to the poor would not do that; the fire would consume and offer nothing in return. She would try.

Airey seemed to surrender himself into her hands; he climbed into the cab docilely. She had run down first and given the man a direction. Airey did not ask where they were going. She opened the little bag, took out its contents, and thrust them into his hands; he pocketed them without a word. They drove westward. She glanced at him covertly once or twice; his face was puzzled, but not pained. He wore an air of sedate meditation; it was so out of keeping with the character of the expedition that Peggy smiled again.

She darted another quick look at him as they drew up at their first destination. He raised his brows a little, but followed her in silence. Peggy gave a gasp of relief as they passed within the doors.

The shopman was not tall and prim, like the bank clerk; he was short, stout, and inclined to roguishness; his eyes twinkled over Peggy, but he was fairly at his wits' end for an explanation. They could not be an engaged pair; Airey's manner gave no hint of it—and the shopman was an experienced judge. Was it an intrigue? Really, in the shopman's opinion, Airey's coat forbade the supposition.

He inclined to the theory of a doting uncle or a prodigal godfather. He tumbled out his wares in the profusion such a chance demanded.

At first Airey was very indifferent, but presently he warmed up. He became critical as to the setting of a ring, as to the stones in a bracelet. He even suggested once or twice that the colour of the stones was not suitable, and Peggy was eager to agree. The shopman groped in deeper darkness, since he had taken Peggy's complexion as his guiding star. However the bargains were made—that was the thing; three or four little boxes lay on the counter neatly packed.

'I will bring them round myself, madame, if you will favour me with the address.'

'We'll take them with us, please,' said Peggy.

There was a moment's pause; a polite but embarrassed smile appeared on the shopman's face; an altogether different explanation had for the moment suggested itself.

'We'll pay now and take them with us,' said Peggy.

'Oh, certainly, if you prefer, madame,' murmured the shopman gratefully. He engaged upon figures. Peggy jumped down from her chair and ranged about the shop, inspecting tiaras at impossible prices. She did not come back for three or four minutes. Airey was waiting for her, the small boxes in his hand.

She darted out of the shop and gave the cabman another direction. Airey followed her with a slowness that seemed deliberate. She said nothing till they stopped again; then she observed, just as she got out of the cab, 'This is the best place for pearls.'

Airey was a connoisseur of pearls, or so it seemed. He awoke to an extraordinary interest in them; Peggy and he actually quarrelled over the relative merits of a couple of strings. The shopman arbitrated in favour of the more highly priced; it had been Airey's choice, and he was ungracefully exultant.

'I don't like shopping with you,' declared Peggy pettishly.

'Anything for a quiet life!' sighed Airey. 'We'll have them both.'

A quick suspicion shot into her eyes.

'No, no, no,' she whispered imperatively.

'Why not?'

'It would just spoil it all. Don't spoil it, Airey!'

He yielded. Here again the shopman had several theories, but no conviction as to the situation.

'Now we might lunch,' Peggy suggested. 'It's very tiring work, isn't it?'

At lunch Airey was positively cantankerous. Nothing in the *table d'hôte* meal satisfied him; the place had to be ransacked for recondite dainties. As for wine, he tried three brands before he would drink, and then did not pretend to be satisfied. The cigar he lit afterwards was an ostentatious gold-wrapped monster. 'We procure them especially for the Baron von Plutopluter,' the waiter informed him significantly.

'I'll put half a dozen in my pocket,' said Airey.

Peggy eyed the cigar apprehensively.

'Will that take very long?' she asked. 'We've lots more to do, you know.'

'What more is there to do?' he inquired amiably.

'Well, there's a good deal left still, you know,' she murmured in a rather embarrassed way.

'By Jove, so there is,' he agreed. 'But I don't quite see——'

Certainly Peggy was a little troubled; her confidence seemed to fail her rather; she appeared to contemplate a new and difficult enterprise.

'There isn't a bit too much if—if we do the proper thing,' she said. She looked at him—it might be said she looked over him—with a significant gaze. He glanced down at his coat:

'Oh, nonsense! There's no fun in that,' he objected.

'It's quite half the whole thing,' she insisted.

There were signs of rebellion about him; he fussed and

fidgeted, hardly doing justice to the Baron von Plutopluter's taste in cigars.

'I shall look such an ass,' he grumbled at last.

'You shall be quite moderate,' she pleaded speciously, but insincerely. She was relieved at the form of his objection; she had feared worse. His brow, too, cleared a little.

'Is there really any philosophy in it, Peggy?' he asked in a humorous puzzle.

'You liked it. You know you enjoyed it this morning.'

'That was for—well, I hope for somebody else.'

'Do try it—just this once,' she implored.

He abandoned himself to her persuasion; had not that been his bargain for the day? The hansom was called into service again. First to Panting's—where Airey's coat gave a shock such as the establishment had not experienced for many a day—then to other high-class shops. Into some of these Peggy did not accompany him. She would point to a note and say, 'Not more than half the change out of that,' or 'No change at all out of that.' When Airey came out she watched eagerly to see how profound would be the shopman's bow, how urgent his entreaty that he might be honoured by further favours. It is said that the rumour of a new millionaire ran through the London of trade that day.

'Are you liking it, Airey?' She was nearly at an end of her invention when she put the question.

He would give her no answer. 'Have you anywhere else you want to go?'

She thought hard. He turned to her smiling:

'Positively I will not become the owner of a grand piano.'

A brilliant idea flashed on her—obvious as soon as discovered, like all brilliant ideas:

'Why, you'll have nothing decent to carry them in when you go visiting!'

A sudden sense of ludicrousness overcame Airey; he lay back in the cab and laughed. Was the idea of visiting so ludicrous? Or was it the whole thing? And Peggy's

anxious seriousness alternating with fits of triumphant vivacity? All through the visit to the trunk-maker's Airey laughed.

'I can't think of anything else—though there s a note left,' she said with an air of vexed perplexity.

'You're absolutely gravelled, are you?' he asked. 'No, no, not the piano!'

'I'm finished,' she acknowledged sorrowfully. She turned to him with an outburst of gleefulness. 'Hasn't it been a wonderful day? Haven't we squandered, Airey?'

'We've certainly done ourselves very well,' said he.

The cabman begged directions through the roof.

'I don't know,' murmured Peggy in smiling despair. 'Yes, yes,' she called, 'back to Danes Inn! Tea and bread-and-butter, Airey!'

He took the key of his chambers from his pocket. 'You go and make tea. I'll be after you directly.'

'Have you thought of anything else?' she cried with a merry smile.

'I want to walk home and think about it,' said Airey. 'I sha'n't be long. Good-bye.' He recollected a trifle. 'Here's some money for the cab.'

'All that?' asked Peggy.

'He's sure we're mad already. Don't let's disturb his convictions,' Airey argued.

She gave no order to the man for a moment; she sat and watched Airey stroll off down Regent Street, his hands in his pockets (he never would carry a stick) and his head bent a little forward, as his custom was. 'What is he thinking?' she asked herself. What would he think when he realised the freak into which she had led him? He might turn very bitter—not with her, but with himself. The enjoyment into which he had been betrayed might now, in a reaction of feeling, seem the merest folly. How should she argue that it had not been? What would any sober judgment on it say? Peggy drove back to Danes Inn in an anxious and depressed state. Yet ever and again the humours of the expedition

broke in on her memory, and she smiled again. She chinked the two sovereigns he had given her in her hand. What was the upshot of the day? When she paid the cabman she exchanged smiles with him; that gave her some little comfort.

Danes Inn was comforting too. She hastened to make tea; everything was to be as in old days; to add to the illusion, she herself, having been too excited to eat lunch, was now genuinely hungry. She began to cut bread-and-butter. The loaf was stale! Why, that was like old days too; she used to grumble at that, and Airey always seemed distressed; he used to pledge himself to have new loaves, but they did not always come. Now she saw why. She cut the bread with a liberal and energetic hand; but as she cut—nothing could be more absurd or incongruous—tears came into her eyes. 'He never grudged me enough, anyhow,' she murmured, buttering busily.

Surely, surely, what she had done should turn to good? Must it stand only as a fit of madness, to be looked back on with shame or spoken of with bitter ridicule? It was open enough to all this. Her heart still declared that it was open to something else too. The sun shot a ray in at the big dingy window, and lit up her face and hair. Her task was finished; she threw herself into her usual chair and waited. When he came she would know. He would have thought it over. His step was on the stair; she had left the door unlatched for him; she sat and waited, shutting her eyes before the brightness of that intruding ray.

An apprehension seized her—the fear of a task which she delayed. The step might not be Airey's; it might be Tommy Trent's. She might never be ready with her apology to Tommy, but at any rate she was not ready yet. No, surely it could not be Tommy! Why should he happen to come now? It was much more likely to be Airey.

The expected happened; after all, it sometimes does. Airey it was; the idea that it was Tommy had served only to increase Peggy's sense of the generally critical character

of the situation. She had taken such risks with everybody —perhaps she must say such liberties.

'Tea's ready,' she called to Airey the moment he appeared.

He took no sort of notice of that. His face, grave, as a rule, and strong, heretofore careworn too, had put on a strange boyish gaiety. He came up behind her chair. She tried to rise. He pressed her down, his hands on her shoulders.

'Sit still,' he commanded. 'Lean your head forward. You've got a plaguey lot of hair, Peggy!'

'What are you doing?' she demanded fiercely.

'You've ordered me about all day. Sit still.'

She felt his fingers on her neck; then she felt too, the touch of things smooth and cold. A little clasp clicked home. Airey Newton sprang back. Peggy was on her feet in a moment.

'You've done that, after all?' she cried indignantly.

'You were at the end of your ideas. That's mine—and it balanced the thing out to the last farthing!'

'I told you it would spoil it all!' Her reproach was bitter, as she touched the string of pearls.

'No, Peggy,' he said. 'It only spoils it if it was a prank, an experiment, a test of your ingenuity, young woman. But it doesn't spoil it if it was something else.'

'What else?' she asked softly, sinking back again into her chair and fingering his present with a touch so gentle as to seem almost reverent. 'What else, Airey dear?'

It came on me as I walked away from the shop—not while I was going there. I was rather unhappy till I got there. But as I walked home—with that thing—it seemed to come on me.' He was standing before her with the happy look of a man to whom happiness is something strange and new. '"That's it," I thought to myself, "though how the deuce that chit found it out——!" It would be bad, Peggy, if a man who had worshipped an idol kicked it every day after he was converted. It would be

vicious and unbecoming. But he should kick it once in token of emancipation. If a man had loved an unworthy woman (supposing there are any), he should be most courteous to her always, shouldn't he?'

'As a rule,' smiled Peggy.

'As a rule, yes,' he caught up eagerly. 'But shouldn't she have the truth once? She'd have been a superstition too, and for once the truth should be told. Well, all that came to me. And that's the philosophy of it. Though how you found it out——! Well, no matter. So it's not a mere freak. Was it a mere test of your ingenuity, young friend?'

'I just had to try it,' said Peggy Ryle, bewildered, delighted, bordering on tears.

'So will you wear the pearls?' He paused, then laughed. 'Yes, and eat your bread-and-butter.' He came up to her, holding out his hands. 'The chains are loose, Peggy; the chains are loose.' He seized his pipe and began to fill it, motioning her again towards the tea-table. To humour him she went to it and took up a slice of bread-and-butter.

'A stale loaf, Airey!' she whispered—and seemed to choke before she tasted it in an anticipated struggle with its obstinate substance.

He smiled in understanding. 'How men go wrong—and women! Look at me, look at Fricker, yes, look at—her! We none of us knew the way. Fricker won't learn. She has—perhaps! I have, I think.' He moved towards her. 'And you've done it, Peggy.'

'No, no,' she cried. 'Oh, how can you be so wrong as that?'

'What?' He stood still in surprise. 'Didn't you suggest it all? Didn't you take me? Wasn't it for you that I did it?'

'Oh, you're so blind!' she cried scornfully. 'Perhaps I suggested it, perhaps I went with you! What does that matter?'

'Well, Peggy?' he said in his old indulgent, pleasant way.

'Oh, I'm glad only one thing's changed in you!' she burst out.

'Well, Peggy?' he persisted.

'Were you thinking of me?' she demanded contemptuously. 'Were you kicking your idol for me? Were you buying for me? What made it harder to buy after lunch than before? Was that the difference between buying for yourself and for me?' Her scorn grew with every question. 'What have I done that you should give me this?' She plucked fretfully at the offending string of pearls.

'Never mind that. It was only to use up the change—if you like. What do you mean by the rest of it?'

'What do I mean?' cried Peggy. 'I mean that if you've done her a service, she's done you more. If you've given her back her self-respect, what hasn't she done for you? Are you going to her as her saviour? Oh, I know you won't talk about it! But is that in your mind? Go to her as yours too! Be honest, Airey! Whose face was in your mind through the drive to-day? If you ever thought of telling it all, whom were you going to tell it to? If you wanted to be free, for whom did you want your freedom? I! What had I to do with it? If I could seem to speak with her voice, it was all I could do. And you've been thinking that she's done nothing for you. Oh, the injustice of it!' She put up her hand and laid it on his, which now rested on the back of her chair. 'Don't you see, Airey; don't you see?'

He smoked his pipe steadily, but as yet he gave her no assent.

'It's cost me nothing—or not much,' Peggy went on. 'I broke two promises——'

'Two?' he interrupted quickly.

'Yes, one you know—to Tommy.' He nodded. 'The other to her—I promised to tell no one she was ruined. But that's not much. It seems to me as if all that she's

gone through, all she's lost, all she's suffered—yes, if you like, all the wrong things she's done—had somehow all been for you. She was the only woman who could have made the change in you. Nobody else could have driven out the idol, Airey. You talk of me. You've known me for years. Did I ever drive it out? No, she had to do it. And before she could, she had to be ruined, she had to be in the dust—perhaps she had to be cruel or unjust to others. I can't work out the philosophy of it, but that's how it's happened.' She paused, only to break out vehemently again: 'You spoil it with your talk of me; you spoil it with the necklace!' With a sudden movement she raised her hands, unclasped the pearls from about her neck, and threw them on the table. 'Everything for her, Airey,' she begged, 'everything for her!'

His eyes followed the pearls, and he smiled. 'But what about all the things for me?'

'Aren't they for her too? Aren't you for her? Wouldn't you go to her as fine as you could?'

'What a woman—what a very woman you are!' he chuckled softly.

'No, that's all right,' she insisted eagerly. 'Would she be happy if you lavished things on her and were still wretched if you had anything for yourself?' She was full of her subject; she sprang up and faced him. 'Not this time to the poor, because they can't repay! Not this time to the fire, because it would give you no profit! You must love this—it's a great investment!'

He sat down in the chair she had left empty and played with the pearls that lay on the table.

'Yes, you're right,' he said at last. 'She was the beginning of it. It was she who—but shall I tell that to her?'

'Yes, tell it to her, to her only,' urged Peggy Ryle.

'Give me your hands, Peggy. I want to tell something to you.'

'No, no, there's nothing to tell me—nothing!'

'If the philosophy is great and true, is there to be no credit for the teacher?'

'Did I?' murmured Peggy, 'did I?' She went on in a hurried whisper: 'If that's at all true, perhaps Tommy Trent will forgive me for breaking my word.'

'If Fricker fell, and I have fallen, who is Tommy Trent?'

She moved away with a laugh, hunted for a cigarette—the box was hidden by papers—found it, and lit it. She saw Airey take up the pearls, go to the safe, open it, and lock them in.

'Never!' she cried in gay but determined protest.

'Yes, some day,' said he quietly, as he went back to his seat.

They sat together in silence till Peggy had finished her cigarette and thrown it away.

'If all goes well,' he said softly, more as though he spoke to himself than to her, 'I shall have something to work for now. I can fancy work will be very pleasant now, if things go well, Peggy.'

She rose and crossed over to him.

'I must run away,' she said softly. She leant down towards him. 'Is it a great change?' she asked.

'Tremendous—as tremendous as its philosophy.' He was serious under the banter. She was encouraged to her last venture, which he might have laughed back into retreat.

'It isn't really any change to me,' she told him in a voice that trembled a little. 'You've always been all right to me. This has always been a refuge and a hospitable home to me. If it had all failed, I should have loved you still, Airey, my friend.'

Airey was silent again for an instant.

'Thank God, I think I can believe you in that,' he said at last.

She waited a moment longer, caressing his hand gently.

'And you'll go soon?' she whispered. 'You'll go to her soon?'

'This very night, my dear,' said Airey Newton.

Peggy stood upright. Again the sun's rays caught her

eyes and hair, and flashed on her hands as she stretched them out in an ample luxury of joy.

'Oh, what a world it is, if you treat it properly, Airey!' she cried.

But she also had made her discovery. It was with plain amusement and a little laugh, still half-incredulous, that she added: 'And after all there may be some good in saving money too!'

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAST KICK

It was no wonder that Trix Trevalla was holding up her head again. Her neck was freed from a triple load. Mervyn was gone, and gone, she had warrant for believing, if not in contentment, yet in some degree of charity. Beaufort Chance, that terror of hers, whose coarse rebukes made justice seem base cruelty, was gone too—and Trix was still unregenerate enough not to care a jot with what feelings. His fate seemed so exquisitely appropriate to him as to exclude penitence in her. Lastly, Fricker was gone, and with him the damning sense of folly, of being a silly dupe, which had weighed more sorely than anything else on a spirit full of pride. Never a doubt had she about Fricker's letter. He had indeed been honourable in his dealing with Peggy Ryle; he had left Trix to think that in surrendering the shares to him she fell in with a business proposal which he was interested in making, and that she gave at least as good as she received. It needed very little more to make her believe that she was conferring a favour on him, and thereby cancelling the last item of the score that he once had against her. Surely, then, Peggy was both wise and merciful in arguing that she should not know the truth, but should still think that she was in debt to no man for her emancipation.

Let not Peggy's mercy be disputed, nor her wisdom either; for these points are immaterial. The fault that young lady did commit lay in a little oversight. It is well to decide that a secret shall be kept; but it is prudent, as a preliminary thereto, to consider how many people already

know it or are in a position where they may find it out. Since, though the best thing of all may be that it should never be told, the second best is often to tell it oneself—and the worst of all to leave the telling in the hands of an enemy. It is just possible that Peggy had grown a little too confident with all her successful generalship. At any rate this oversight of hers made not a little trouble.

'Dear Mr. Trent,—Come to me immediately, please. I have heard a most extraordinary story. I can hardly believe it, but I must see you at once. I shall be at home from six to seven and later.

'Yours truly,
'TRIX TREVALLA.'

'Now what's the meaning of that?' asked Tommy, smoothing his hat and setting out again without so much as sitting down for a pipe after he got back from the City. 'Has Peggy been up to mischief again?' He frowned; he had not forgiven Peggy. It is not safe to discourage a standard which puts the keeping of promises very high and counts any argument which tends the other way in a particular case as dangerous casuistry. Tommy's temperament was dead against casuistry; perhaps, to be candid, his especial gifts of intellect constituted no temptation to the art.

Trix received him with chilling haughtiness. Evidently something was wrong. And the wrong thing was to be visited on the first chance-comer—just like a woman, thought Tommy, hasty in his inference and doubtless unjust in his psychology. In a few moments he found that he was considered by no means a chance-comer in this affair; nor had he been sent for merely as an adviser. Before Trix really opened the case at all, he had discovered that in some inexplicable way he was a culprit; the tones in which she bade him sit down were enough to show any intelligent man as much.

Trix might be high and mighty, but the assumption of this

manner hid a very sore heart. If what she was now told were true, the last and greatest burden had not been taken away, and still she was shamed. But this inner mind could not be guessed from her demeanour.

'We've been good friends, Mr. Trent,' she began, 'and I have to thank you for much kindness——'

'Not at all. That's all right, really, Mrs. Trevalla.'

'But I'm forced to ask you,' she continued with overriding imperturbability, 'by what right you concern yourself in my affairs?'

Tommy had a temper, and rather a quick one. He had been a good deal vexed lately too. In his heart he thought that rather too much fuss had been occasioned by and about Mrs. Trevalla; this was, perhaps, one of the limitations of sympathy to which lovers are somewhat subject.

'I don't,' he answered rather curtly.

'Oh, I suppose you're in the plot to deceive me!' she flashed out.

If he were, it was very indirectly, and purely as a business man. He had been asked whether the law could reach Fricker, and had been obliged to answer that it could not. He had been told subsequently to raise money on certain securities. That was his whole connection with the matter.

'But don't you think you were taking a liberty—an enormous liberty? You'll say it was kindness. Well, I don't dispute your motive, but it was presumption too.' Trix's disappointment was lashing her into a revenging fury. 'What right had you to turn me into a beggar, to make me take your money, to think I'd live on your charity?' She flung the question at him with a splendid scorn.

Tommy wrinkled his brow in hopeless perplexity.

'On my honour, I don't know what you're talking about,' he declared. 'My charity? I've never offered you charity, Mrs. Trevalla.'

'You brazen it out?' she cried.

'I don't know about brazening,' said Tommy with a wry smile. 'I say it's all nonsense, if that's what you mean.

Somebody's been——' He pulled himself up on the edge of an expression not befitting the seriousness of the occasion. 'Somebody's been telling you a cock-and-bull story.'

'What other explanation is there?'

'I might possibly discover one if you'd begin at the beginning,' suggested Tommy with hostile blandness.

'I will begin at the beginning, as you call it,' said Trix, with a contempt for his terminology that seemed hardly warranted. She took a letter from her pocket. 'This is from Mr. Beaufort Chance.'

'That fellow!' ejaculated Tommy.

'Yes, that fellow, Mr. Trent. Mr. Fricker's friend, his partner. Listen to this.' She sought a passage a little way down the first page. 'Not so clever as you think!' she read. 'Glowing Stars were as pure a fraud as ever you thought them. But any story's good enough for you, and you believed Fricker took them back. So he did—for a matter of three thousand pounds. And he could have had four if he liked. That's what your cleverness is worth.' Trix's voice faltered. She got it under control and went on with flushed cheeks, the letter shaking in her hand. 'Who paid the money? Ask Peggy Ryle. Has Peggy Ryle got thousands to throw about? Which of your charming new friends has? Ask Miss Peggy who'd give four thousand for her smiles! If she doesn't know, I should think you might inquire of Tommy Trent.' Trix stopped. 'There's some more about—about me, but it doesn't matter,' she ended.

Tommy Trent pulled his moustache. Here was a very awkward situation. 'Beaufort Chance's last kick was a nasty one. Why couldn't Fricker have held his tongue, instead of indulging his partner with such entertaining confidences?

'Well, what have you to say to that?' His puzzled face and obvious confusion seemed to give her the answer. With something like a sob she cried, 'Ah, you daren't deny it!'

It was difficult for Tommy. It seemed simple indeed to deny that he had given Peggy any money; he might strain

his conscience and declare that he knew nothing of any money being given. What would happen? Of a certainty Peggy Ryle could not dispose of thousands. He foresaw how Trix would track out the truth by her persistent and indignant questions. The truth would implicate his friend Airey Newton, and he himself would stand guilty of just such a crime as that for which he held Peggy so much to blame. His thoughts of Beaufort Chance were deep and dark.

'I can't explain it,' he stammered at length. 'All I know is——'

'I want the truth! Can I never have the truth?' cried Trix. 'Even a letter like that I'm glad of, if it tells me the truth. And I thought——' The bitterness of being deluded was heavy on her again. She attacked Tommy fiercely. 'On your honour do you know nothing about it? On your honour did Peggy pay Mr. Fricker money? On your honour did you give it her?'

The single word 'Woman!' would have summed up Tommy's most intimate feelings. It was, however, too brief for diplomacy, or for a man who wished to keep possession of the floor and exclude further attacks from an opponent in an overpowering superiority.

'What I've always noticed,' he began in a deliberate tone, 'about women is that if they write you the sort of note that looks as if you were the only friend they had on earth, or the only fellow whose advice would save 'em from ruin, and you come on that understanding—well, as soon as they get you there, they proceed to drop on you like a thousand of bricks.'

The simile was superficially inappropriate to Trix's trim tense figure; it had a deeper truth, though.

'If you'd answer my questions——' she began in an ominous and deceptive calm.

'Which of them?' cried Tommy in mad exasperation.

'Take them in any order you please,' she conceded graciously.

Tommy's back was against the wall; he fought desperately

for his own honour, desperately for his friends' secrets. One of the friends had betrayed his. She was a girl. *Cadit quæstio.*

'If I had supposed that this was going to be a business interview——'

'And about your business, it seems, though I thought it was mine! Am I living on your charity?'

'No!' he thundered out, greeting the simple question and the possible denial. 'I've never paid a shilling for you.' His tone implied that he was content, moreover, to leave that state of affairs as it was.

'Then on whose?' asked Trix. Her voice became pathetic; her attitude was imploring now. She blamed herself for this, thinking it lost her all command. How profoundly wrong she was Tommy's increased distress witnessed very plainly.

'I say, now, let's discuss it calmly. Now just suppose—just take the hypothesis——'

Trix turned from him with a quick jerk of her head. The baize door outside had swung to and fro. Tommy heard it too; his eye brightened; there was no intruder whom he would not have welcomed, from the tax-collector to the bull of Bashan; he would have preferred the latter as being presumably the more violent.

'There, somebody's coming! I told you it was no place to discuss things of this kind, Mrs. Trevalla.'

'Of all cowardly creatures, men are——' began Trix.

A low, gently crooned song reached them from the passage. The words were not very distinct—Peggy sang to please herself, not to inform the world—but the air was soothing and the tones tender. Yet neither of them seemed moved to artistic enjoyment.

'Peggy, by Jove!' whispered Tommy in a fearful voice.

'Now we can have the truth,' said Trix. She spoke almost like a virago; but when she sat at the table, her chin between her hands, she turned on Tommy such a pitiful, harassed face that he could have cried with her.

In came Peggy; she had been to one or two places since Danes Inn, but the glory and gaiety of her visit there hung about her still. She entered gallantly. Then she saw Tommy—and Tommy only at first.

'Oh!' she exclaimed. 'Are you waiting for me?'

Her joy fled; that was strange, since it was Tommy. But there he sat, and sat frowning. It was the day of reckoning!

'I've—I've been meaning to come and see you,' Peggy went on hastily, 'and—and explain.'

'I must ask you to explain to me first, Peggy.'

This from a most forbidding, majestic Trix, hitherto unperceived. She had summoned her forces again; the pleading pitifulness was gone from her face. Tommy reproached himself for a sneak and a coward, but for the life of him he could not help thinking, 'Now they can fight it out together!'

At first Peggy was relieved; a *tête-à-tête* was avoided. She did not dream that her secret was found out. Who would have thought of Fricker's taste for a good story or of that last kick of malice in Beaufort Chance?

'Oh, there you are too, Trix! So glad to find you. I've only run in for just a minute to change my frock before I go out to dinner with the——'

'It's only a quarter to seven. I want to ask you a question first.'

Trix's chilliness was again most pronounced and unmistakable. Peggy glanced at Tommy; a sullen and wilfully uninforming shrug of the shoulders was all that she got. Peggy had enjoyed the day very much; she was young enough to expect the evening to be like it; she protested vigorously against this sort of atmosphere.

'What's the matter with you both?' she cried.

Trix came straight to the point this time. She would have doubted Beaufort if he had brought gifts in his hand; she did not doubt him when he came with a knife.

'Whose money did you give Mr. Fricker to buy me off?' she asked. She held out her letter to Peggy.

Without a word, beyond a word, Peggy took it and read. Yes, there it was. No honour among thieves! None between her and Fricker! Stay, he had said he would not tell Trix; he had never said or written that he would not tell his partner Beaufort Chance. The letter of the bond! And he had professed to disapprove of Shylock! All that she had ever said about his honourable dealing, all that handsome testimonial of hers, Peggy took back on the spot. Thus did the whole of the beautiful scheme go awry!

'Trix dearest——' she began.

'My question, please,' said Trix Trevalla. But she had not the control to stop there. 'All of you, all of you!' she broke out passionately. 'Even you, Peggy! Have I no friend left—nobody who'll treat me openly, not play with me as if I were a child, and a silly child? What can I believe? Oh, it's too hard for me!' Again her face sank between her hands; again was the awakening very bitter to her.

They sat silent. Both were loyal; both felt as though they were found out in iniquity.

'You did it?' asked Trix in a dull voice, looking across at Peggy.

There was no way out of that. But where was the exultation of the achievement, where the glory?

'Forgive me, dear; forgive me,' Peggy murmured, almost with a sob.

'Your own money?'

'Mine!' echoed Peggy, between a sob and a laugh now.

'Whose?' Trix asked. There was no answer. She turned on Tommy. 'Whose?' she demanded again.

They would not answer. It was *peine forte et dure*; they were crushed, but they made no answer. Trix rose from her chair. Her manner was tragic, and no pretence went to give that impression.

'I—I'm not equal to it,' she declared. 'It drives me mad. But I have one friend still. I'll go to him. He'll find out the truth for me and tell it me. He'll make you take back your money and give me back my shares.'

Irresistibly the man of business found voice in Tommy Trent. An appeal to instinct beats everything.

'Do you really suppose,' he asked, 'that old Fricker will disgorge three thousand pounds?'

'That's it!' cried Trix. 'Look what that makes of me! And I thought——'

'The money's past praying for now, anyhow,' said Tommy, in a sort of gloomy satisfaction. There is, as often observed, a comfort in knowing the worst.

'I'll go to him,' said Trix. 'I can trust him. He wouldn't betray me behind my back. He'll tell me the truth as—as I told it to him. Yes, I'll go to Mr. Newton.'

It was odd, but neither of them had anticipated the name. It struck on them with all the unexpectedness of farce. On a moment's reflection it had the proper inevitability of tragedy. Tommy was blankly aghast; he could make nothing of it. In all its mingled effect, the poignancy of its emotion, the ludicrousness of its coincidences, the situation was more than Peggy Ryle could bear. She fell to laughing feebly—laughing though miserable at heart.

'Yes, I'll go to Airey Newton. He won't laugh at me, and he'll let me have the truth.' She turned on them again. 'I've treated some people badly; I've never treated you badly,' she cried. 'Why should you play tricks on me? Why should you laugh? And I was ready to turn from all the world to you! But now—yes, I'll go to Airey Newton.'

Fortune had not done yet; she had another effect in store. Yet she used no far-fetched materials—only a man's desire to see the woman whom he had come to love. There was nothing extraordinary about this. The wonder would have been had he taken an hour longer in coming.

Peggy heard the step on the stairs; the others heard it a second later. Again Tommy brightened up in the hope of a respite—ah, let it be a stranger, someone outside all secrets, whose presence would drive them underground! Trix's denunciations were stayed. Did she know the step? Peggy knew it. 'You'll go to her soon?' 'This very night, my

dear.' The snatch of talk came back to her in blazing vividness.

The baize door swung to and fro. 'All right, Mrs. Welling; I'll knock,' came in well-known tones.

'Why, it is Mr. Newton!' cried Trix, turning a glance of satisfied anger on her pair of miserable culprits.

Tommy was paralysed. Peggy rose and retreated into a corner of the room. A chair was in her way; she caught hold of it and held it in front of her, seeming to make it a barricade. She was very upset still, but traitorous laughter played about the corners of her mouth—it reconnoitred, seeking to make its position good. Aggressive satisfaction breathed from Trix Trevalla as she waited for the opening of the door.

Airey put his head inside.

'Mrs. Welling told me I should find you,' he began; for Trix's was the first figure that he saw.

'You find us all, old fellow,' interrupted Tommy Trent, with malicious and bitter jocularity.

At this information Airey's face did not glow with pleasure. Friends are friends, but sometimes their appropriate place is elsewhere. He carried it off well though, exclaiming:

'What, you? And Peggy too?'

Trix had no idea of allowing wandering or diversions.

'I was just coming round to Danes Inn, Mr. Newton,' she said, in a voice resolute but trembling.

'To Danes Inn?' The listeners detected a thrill of pleasure in his voice.

'Yes, to see you. I want your help. I want you to tell me something. Peggy here——' she pointed a scornful finger at Peggy entrenched in the corner behind her chair, and looking as though she thought that personal violence was not out of the possible range of events—'Peggy here has been kind—what she calls kind, I suppose—to me. She's been to Mr. Fricker and paid him a lot of money to get me out of Glowing Stars—to persuade him to let me out of them.

You told me there was some hope of them. You were wrong. There was none. But Peggy went and bought me out. Mr. Chance has written and told me so.'

Airey had never got further than the threshold. He stood there listening.

Trix went on, in a level hard voice: 'He thinks Mr. Trent found the money. It was three thousand pounds—it might have been four. I don't know why Mr. Fricker only took three when he might have had four.'

For an instant Airey glanced at Peggy's face.

'But whether it was three or four, it couldn't have been Peggy's own money. I've asked Peggy whose it was. I've asked Mr. Trent whether it was his. I can't get any answer out of either of them. They both seem to think there's no need to answer me. They both seem to think that I've been such a—such a—— Oh, what shall I do?' She dropped suddenly into a chair and hid her face in her hands.

At last Airey Newton advanced slowly towards her.

'Come, come, Mrs. Trevalla,' he began.

Trix raised her face to his. 'So, as I had no other friend —no other friend I could trust—and they wouldn't help me, I was coming to you. You won't forsake me? You'll tell me the truth?' Her voice rose strong again for a minute. 'This is terribly hard to bear,' she said, 'because I'd come to think it was all right, and that I hadn't been a wretched dupe. And now I have! And my own dear friends have done it too! First my enemies, then my friends!'

Tommy Trent cleared his throat, and looked shamefully indifferent; but for no apparent reason he stood up. Peggy sallied suddenly from her entrenchments, ran to Trix, and fell on her knees beside her.

'Trix, dear Trix!' she murmured.

'Yes, I daresay you loved me, but it's too hard, Peggy.' Trix's voice was hard and unforgiving still.

Was the position desperate? So far as Fortune's caprice went, so it seemed. Among the three the secret was gone beyond recall. Not falsehood the most thorough nor

pretence the most artistic could save it. The fine scheme of keeping Trix in the dark now and telling her at some future moment—some future moment of idyllic peace—was hopelessly gone. Now in the stress of the thing, in the face of the turmoil of her spirit, she must be told. It was from this that Tommy Trent had shrunk—from this no less than from the injury to his plighted word. At the idea of this Peggy had cowered even more than from any superstitious awe of the same obligation binding her.

But Airey Newton did not appear frightened nor at a loss. His air was gentle but quite decided, his manner quiet but confident. A calm happiness seemed to be about him. There was subtle amusement in his glance at his two friends; the same thing was not absent from his eyes when they turned to Trix, although it was dominated by something tenderer. Above all, he seemed to know what to do.

Tommy watched him with surprised admiration. The gladdest of smiles broke out suddenly on Peggy's face. She darted from Trix to him and stood by him, saying just 'Airey!'

He took her hand for a moment and patted it. 'It's all right,' said he.

Trix's drooping head was raised again; her eyes too were on him now.

'All right?' she echoed in wondering tones.

'Yes, we can put all this straight directly. But——'

There was the first hint of embarrassment in his manner.

'But what?' asked Trix.

He had no chance to answer her. 'Yes, yes!' burst from Peggy in triumphant understanding. She ran across to Tommy and caught him by the arm. 'There's only my room, but that must do for once,' she cried.

'What? What do you mean?' he inquired.

'Peggy's right,' said Airey, smiling. There was no doubt that he felt equal to the situation. He seemed a new man to Peggy, and her heart grew warm; even Tommy looked at him with altered eyes.

'The fact is, Tommy,' said Airey easily, 'I think I can explain this better to Mrs. Trevalla if you leave us alone.'

Trix's head was raised; her eyes leapt to meet his. She did not yet understand—her idea of him was too deep-rooted. It was trust that her eyes spoke, not understanding.

'Leave us alone,' said Airey Newton.

Peggy beckoned to Tommy, and herself made towards the door. As she passed Airey, he smiled at her. 'All right!' he whispered again.

Then Peggy knew. She ran into the passage and thence to her room. Tommy followed, amazed and rather rueful.

'We must wait here. You may smoke,' said she kindly; but she added eagerly, 'and so will I.'

'But, I say, Peggy——'

'Wasn't it just splendid that he should come then?'

'Capital for us! But he did it, you know!' Tommy's tone was awestruck.

'Why, of course he did it, Tommy.'

'Then, in my opinion, he's in for a precious nasty quarter of an hour.'

Peggy plumped down on the bed, and her laugh rang out in mellow gentleness again.

'Doesn't it strike you that she might forgive him what she wouldn't forgive us?' she asked.

'By Jove! Because she's in love with him?'

'Oh, I suppose that's not a reason for forgiveness with everybody,' murmured Peggy, smoking hard.

CHAPTER XXIV

TO THE SOUL SHOP

With the departure of the other two, Trix's tempestuousness finally left her; it had worn itself out—and her. She sat very quiet, watching Airey Newton with a look that was saved from forlorn despair only by a sort of appeal; it witnessed to a hope which smouldered still, and might burn again if he would fan it. A sense of great physical fatigue was on her; she lay back in a collapse of energy, her head resting against the chair, her hands relaxed and idle on the arms of it.

'What a pity we can't leave it just where it is!' said Airey with a compassionate smile. 'Because we can't really put it all straight to-night; that'll take ever so much longer.' He sighed, and smiled at her. He came and laid his hand on one of hers. 'If I've got a life worth living, it's through you,' he told her. 'You were very angry with Tommy Trent, who had nothing to do with it. You were very, very angry with poor Peggy. Well, she was partly responsible; I don't forget that. But in the end it's a thing between you and me. We haven't seen so very much of one another—not if you count by time at least; but ever since that night at Paris there seems to have been something uniting us. Things that happened to you affected me, and—well, anyhow, you used to feel you had to come and tell me about them.'

He caressed her hand gently, and then walked away to the window.

'Yes, I used to feel that,' said Trix softly. 'I came and told you even—even bad things.'

'You chose your man well,' he went on. 'Better than you knew. If you had known, it wouldn't have been fair to choose a confessor so much worse than yourself. But you didn't know. I believe you thought quite highly of me!' There was no bitterness about him, rather a tone of exultation, almost of amusement. He took hold of a chair, brought it nearer to her, and rested his knee on it. 'There was a man who loved a woman and knew that she was ruined. There was no doubt about it. A friend told him; the woman herself told him. The friend said: "You can help." The woman he loved said, "Nobody can help." He could help, but even still he wouldn't. The friend said, "You can give her back life and her care about living." She said, "I have no joy now in living"—her eyes said that to him. Come, guess what his answer was! Can you guess? No, by heaven, nobody in the world could guess! He answered, "Yes, perhaps, but it would cost too much."'

For an instant she glanced at his face; she found him smiling still.

'That's what he said,' Airey pursued, in a tone of cheerful sarcasm. 'The fellow said it would cost too much. Prudent man, wasn't he? Careful and circumspect, setting a capital example to the thriftless folk we see all about us. It was suggested to him—oh, very delicately!—that it was hardly the occasion to count pennies. Then he got as far as asking that the thing should be reduced to figures. The figures appalled him!' A dry chuckle made her look again; she smiled faintly, in sympathy, not in understanding.

'Remarkable fellow, wasn't he? And the best of it was that the woman he loved was so cut up about being ruined and not having made a success of it altogether that she thought it very condescending and noble of him to show any concern about her or to trouble to give her advice. Now this man was always most ready to give advice; all his friends relied on him for that. As far as advice went, he was one of the most generous men in England. Well, there she lay—in the dust, as somebody put it to him. But, as I

say, when it came to figures, the cost of raising her was enormous. Are you feeling an admiration for this hero? Don't you think that the worst, the foolishest woman on earth would have been a bit too good for him? This little trouble of his about figures he had once described as a propensity.'

She leant forward suddenly and looked hard at him. He saw her breath come more quickly.

Airey pulled his beard and continued, smiling still: 'That was the position. Then a girl came to him, a very dangerous girl in my opinion, one who goes about sowing love all over the place in an indiscriminate and hazardous fashion—she carries it about her everywhere, from her shoes to the waves of her hair. She came to him and said, "Well, you're a pretty fellow, aren't you? I've got twopence that I'm going to give. We want tenpence. Out with eightpence, please," said she. "Why so?" he asked, with his hand tight on the eightpence. "She's got ruined just on purpose to give you the chance," said she. That was rather a new point of view to him—but she said it no less.'

'Tell it me plainly,' Trix implored.

'I'm telling it quite plainly,' Airey insisted. 'At last he forked out the tenpence—and sat down and groaned and cried. Lord, how he cried over that tenpence! Till one day the girl came back again and——'

'I thought she only asked for eightpence?' put in Trix, with a swift glance.

'Did I say that? Oh, well, that's not material. She came back, and laid twopence on the table, and said eightpence had been enough. He was just going to grab the twopence and put it back in his pocket again, when she said, "Wouldn't it be nice to spend it?" "Spend it? What on?" he cried. "A new soul," said she, in that wholesale reckless way of hers. "If you get a new soul, she may like you. You can't suppose she'd like you with the one you've got?" She could be candid at times, that girl—oh, all in a very delicate way! So they went out together in a hansom

cab, and drove to the soul shop and bought one. There's a ready-made soul shop, if you know where to find it. It's dearer than the others, but they don't keep you waiting, and you can leave the worn-out article behind you.'

'Well?'

'He liked the feel of the new soul, and began to thank the girl for it. And she said, "Don't thank me. I didn't do it." So he thanked her just a little—but the rest of his thanks he kept.'

There was a long silence. Trix gazed before her with wide-open eyes. Airey tilted his chair gently to and fro.

'You paid the money for me?' she asked at last in a dull voice.

'I gave it and Peggy took it. We did it between us.'

'Was it all yours or any of hers?'

'It was all mine. In the end I had that decency about me.' He went on with a touch of eagerness: 'But it wasn't giving the money; any churl must have done that. It's that now—to-day—I rejoice in it. I thank God the money's gone. And when some came back I wouldn't have it. Ah, there was the last tug—it was so easy to take it back! But no, we went out and—wasted it!' He gave a low, delighted laugh. 'By Jove, how we wasted it!' he repeated with a relish.

'Of all people in the world I never thought of you.'

'What I called my life was half-spent in making it impossible that you should.'

'Where did you get the money from?'

The last touch of his old shame, the last remnant of his old secret triumph, showed in his face.

'I had five or six times as much—there in the safe at Danes Inn. It lay there accumulating, accumulating, accumulating. That was my delight.'

'You were rich?'

'I had made a good income for five or six years. You know what I spent. Will you give a name to what was my

propensity?' For an instant he was bitter. The mood passed; he laughed again.

'You must have been very miserable?' she concluded.

'Worse than that. I was rather happy. Happy, but afraid. A week ago I should have fled to the ends of the earth sooner than tell you. I couldn't have borne to be found out.'

'I know, I know,' she cried, in quick understanding. 'I felt that at——' She stopped in embarrassment. Airey's nod saved her the rest.

'But now I can talk of it. I don't mind now. I'm free.' He broke into open laughter. 'I've spent a thousand pounds to-day. It sounds too deliciously impossible.'

She gave a passing smile; she had not seen the thing done, and hardly appreciated it. Her mind flew back to herself again.

'And you bought Mr. Fricker off? You ransomed me?'

'You were angry with Tommy, you were angry with Peggy'—he turned his chair round suddenly and rested his hands on the back of it—'are you angry with me?'

She made a gesture of petulant protest. 'It leaves me a helpless fool again,' she murmured.

'It was the price of my liberty more than of yours. I had a right—a right—to pay it. Won't you come to the soul shop too? I've been there now; I can show you the way. There was my life—and yours. What was I to do?'

'You meant to deceive me?'

'Yes.' He paused an instant. 'Unless there ever came a time when you would like to be undeceived—when it might seem better to have been helped than not to have needed help. Well, Beaufort Chance upset that scheme. Here we are, face to face with the truth. We've not been that before. How we made pretence with one another!' He shook his head in half-humorous reprobation. She saw with wonder how little unhappy he was about it all, how it all seemed to him a bygone thing, a strange dream which might

retain its meaning and its interest, but ceased to have living importance the moment dawning day put it to flight.

'You told me you weren't cured,' he went on. 'That you still wanted the old life, the old ambition—that my advice still appealed to you. That fatal advice of mine! It did half the mischief. Don't you see my right to pay the money in that again? Still, I tell you, I didn't pay it for you; I paid it for myself.'

'I can give you no return for it.'

'I ask none. The return I have got I've told you. I am free.' He loved the thought; again it brought a smile to his lips. 'There's no question of a return from you to me.'

'Yes, but I shall owe you everything,' she cried. 'The very means of living decently!' Her pride was in arms again as the truth came back to her.

'Then sell all you have and repay me the money,' he suggested. 'Say I'm Fricker. There'll be nobody to buy me off, as Peggy and I bought Fricker off.'

'What?' she exclaimed, startled into betraying her surprise.

'Pay it back,' he cried gaily. 'Pay it all back. I'll take it. I'm not afraid of money now. It might come rolling into Danes Inn—in barrels! Like beer-casks! And a couple of draymen hard on the rope! I shouldn't so much as turn round. I shouldn't count the barrels—I should go on counting the sparrows on the roof. I've not the least objection to be repaid.'

She fell into silence. Airey began strolling about the room again; he smoked a cigarette while she sat without speaking, with her brows knit and her hands now clenching the arms of her chair. Suddenly she broke out in a new protest.

'Oh, that's not it, that's not it! Paying the money back wouldn't cure it. As far as that goes, I could have paid Fricker myself. It's the failure. It's the failure and the shame. Nothing can cure that.'

'Think of my failure, think of my shame! Worse than

yours! You only set about living a little bit in the wrong way. I never set about living at all! I shut out at least a half of life. I refused it. Isn't that the great refusal?'

'You had your work. You worked well?'

'Yes, I did do that. Well, shall we give that half? I had half a life then.'

'And what had I?'

'At least that. More, I think, in spite of everything.'

'And you can forget the failure and the shame?'

'I can almost laugh at them.'

She held out her hands to him, crying again for help:

'How? How?'

A low sound of singing came through the door. Peggy beguiled the vigil with a song. Airey held up his hand for silence. Trix listened; the tears gathered in her eyes.

'Does that say nothing to you?' he asked as the song died away. 'Does that give you no hint of our mistake? No clue to where the rest of life lies? Life isn't taking in only, it's giving out too. And it's not giving out only work, or deeds, or things we've made. It's giving ourselves out too—freely, freely!'

'Giving ourselves out?'

'Yes, to other people. Giving ourselves in comradeship, in understanding, in joy, in love. Oh, good Lord, fancy not having found that out before! What a roundabout road to find it! Hedges and briars and bleeding shins!' He laughed gently. 'But she knows it,' he said, pointing to the door. 'She goes on the royal road to it—straight on the King's highway. She goes blindfold too, which is a funny thing. She couldn't even tell you where she was going.'

Another snatch of song came. It was sentimental in character, but it ended abruptly in uncontrolled gurgles of a mirth free from all such weakness.

'Yes, she gets there, dainty, trim, serene!'

He shook his head, smiling with an infinite affection. Trix Trevalla leant her head on her hand and regarded him with searching eyes.

'Yes, that's true of her,' she said, 'that's true. You've found out the meaning of it.'

'Everything's so plain to find out to-day.'

'Then surely you must be in love with her?' Her eyes were grave and curious still. 'How can you help it? She mayn't love you, but that makes no difference. How can you help loving her?'

'Does it make no difference? I don't know.' He came across to Trix. 'We've travelled the bad road together, you and I,' he said softly. 'I may have seen her far off—against the sky—and steered a course by hers. The course isn't everything. But for your arm I should have fallen by the way. And—should you never have fallen if you'd been quite alone? Or did you fall and need to be picked up again?'

He took both her hands and she let them lie in his; but she still looked at him in fear and doubt, unable to rise to his serenity, unable to put the past behind her as he did. The spectres rose and seemed to bar the path, crying to her that she had no right to tread it.

'I've grown so hard, I've been so hard. Can I forget what I've been and what I've done? Sha'n't I always hear them accusing me? Can I trust myself not to want to go back again? It seems to me that I've lost the power of doing what you say.'

'Never,' said Airey confidently. 'Never!' His smile broke out again. 'Well, certainly not your side of thirty,' he amended, trying to make her laugh.

'Oh, ask Mrs. Bonfill, or Lord Mervyn, or Beaufort Chance of me!'

'They'd all tell me the truth of what they know, I don't doubt it.'

'And you know it too!' she cried, in a sort of shrinking wonder.

'To be sure I know it,' he agreed cheerfully. 'Wasn't I walking beside you all the way?'

'Tell me,' she said. 'If you'd really been a very poor

man, as we all believed you were, would you ever have thought it wise or possible to marry a woman like me?'

She had an eye for a searching question. Airey perceived that.

'Most pertinent, if I were poor! But now you see I'm not. I'm well off—and I'm a prodigal.'

'Ah, you know the truth, you never would!'

'I can't know the truth. I shall find it out only if you marry me now.'

'Suppose I said yes? I said yes to Mortimer Mervyn!'

'And you ran away because——'

'Because I told him——'

'Let me put it in my way, please,' interrupted Airey, suavely but decisively. 'Because you weren't a perfect individual, and he was a difficult person to explain that to. Isn't that about it?'

Trix made a woeful gesture; that was rather less than it, she thought.

'And what did he do? Did he come after you? Did he say, "The woman I love is in trouble; she's ruined; she's so ashamed that she couldn't tell the truth even to me. Even from me she has fled, because she has become unbearable to herself and is terrified of me"? Did he say that? And did he put his traps in a bag, and take a special train, and come after you?'

Trix's lips curved in an irrepressible smile at this picture of a line of conduct imputed, even hypothetically, to the Under-Secretary for War. 'He didn't do exactly that,' she murmured.

'Not he! He said, "She's come a cropper—that's her look-out. But people who come croppers won't do for me. No croppers in the Barmouth family! We don't like them; we aren't accustomed to them in the Barmouth family. I've my career," he said. "That's more to me than she is."' Airey paused a moment and held up an emphatic finger. 'In point of fact, that miserable man, Mervyn, behaved exactly as I should have done a fortnight ago. Substitute

his prejudices and his career for my safe and my money, and he and I would be exactly the same—I mean, a fortnight ago. If ever a man lost a woman by his own act, Mervyn is the man!'

'So if I say yes to you, and run away——?'

'The earth isn't big enough to hide you, nor the railway fares big enough to stop me.'

'And Beaufort Chance?' she murmured, trying him again.

'Men who buy love get the sort of love that's for sale,' he answered in brief contempt.

She smiled as, leaning forward, she put her last question.

'And Mr. Fricker?' said she.

Airey gave a tug at his beard and a puzzled whimsical glance at her.

'Do you press me as to that?'

'Yes, of course I do. What about Mr. Fricker?'

'Well, from all I can learn, it does appear to me that you behaved in a damned shabby way to Fricker. I've not a word to say for you there, not one.'

The answer was so unexpected, so true, so honest, that Trix's laughter rang out in genuine merriment for the first time for many days.

'And when old Fricker saw his chance, I don't wonder that he gave you a nasty dig. It was pure business with Fricker—and you went back on him all along the line!'

She looked at him with eyes still newly mirthful. He had dismissed Beaufort Chance and Mervyn contemptuously enough; one had sought to barter where no barter should be; the other had lost his prize because he did not know how to value it. But when Airey spoke of Fricker's wrongs, there was real and convinced indignation in his voice; in Fricker's interest he did not spare the woman he loved.

'How funny!' she said. 'I've never felt very guilty about Mr. Fricker.'

'You ought to. That was worst of all, in my opinion,' he insisted.

'Well, I was afraid you'd quite acquitted me! Should you be always throwing Mr. Fricker in my face?'

'On occasions probably. I can't resist a good argumentative point. You've got the safe and the red book, you know.'

'I'd sooner die than remind you of them.'

'Nonsense! I sha'n't care in the least,' said Airey.

'Then what will be the good of them to me?' He laughed. But she grew serious, saying, 'I shall care about Mr. Fricker, though.'

'Then don't ask me what I think again.'

He laughed, took a turn the length of the room, and came quickly and suddenly back to her.

'Well, is the unforgivable forgiven?' he asked, standing opposite to her.

'The unforgivable? What do you mean?' she said, with a little start of surprise. He had struck sharply across her current of thought.

'What you couldn't have forgiven Tommy, or Peggy, or anybody? What you couldn't possibly forgive me? You know.' His smile mocked her. 'My having sent the money to Fricker.'

'Oh, I'd forgotten all about it!'

'Things forgotten are things forgiven—and the other way round too. Forgiving, but not forgetting—don't you recognise the twang of hard-hearted righteousness?' He came up to her. 'It was very unforgivable—and you forgot it! Haven't you stumbled on the right principle, Trix?'

She did not rise to any philosophic or general principle. She followed her feeling and gave it expression—or a hint of expression, her eyes being left to fill in the context.

'Somehow it's not so bad, coming from you,' she said.

In an instant he was sitting by her. 'Now I'll tell you what we did this afternoon.'

'You and Peggy Ryle? I'm jealous of Peggy Ryle!'

'A sound instinct, in this case misapplied,' commented Airey. 'Now just you listen.'

The sound of song had ceased. Were all sounds equally able to penetrate doors and cross passages, quite another would have struck on Trix's ears. Peggy was yawning vigorously—while Tommy was trying to find patience in a cigar.

'Where had you been going to dine?' asked Peggy, referring to the meal as a bright but bygone possibility.

'I had been going to have a chop at the club,' murmured Tommy sadly.

'That doesn't help me much,' observed Peggy. 'And I suppose you're going to begin about that wretched promise again? I'm tired to death, but I'll sing again if you do.'

'I've expressed my sentiments. I don't want to rub it in.'

'If Airey hadn't come, you'd have done just the same yourself.'

'No, I shouldn't, Peggy.'

'What would you have done, then?'

'I should have bolted—and dined. And I rather wish I had. I tell you what; if I were you, I'd have one comfortable chair in this room.' He was perched on a straight-backed affair with spindly legs—a base imitation of what (from the sitter's point of view) was always an unfortunate ideal.

'I'd bolt with you—for the sake of dinner,' moaned Peggy. 'What are they doing all this time, Tommy?'

Tommy shrugged his shoulders in undisguised contempt. 'Couldn't we go and dine?' he suggested, with a gleam of hope.

'I want to dine very, very much,' avowed Peggy; 'but I'm too excited.' She looked straight at him, pointed towards the door, and declared, 'I'm going in.'

'You'd better knock something over first.'

'No, I'm going straight in. If it's all right, it won't matter, and we can all go out to dinner together. If they're being silly, I shall stop them. I'm going in, Tommy!'

Tommy rose from the spindle-shanked counterfeit with a determined air

'You'll do nothing of the kind. It isn't fair play,' he said.

'It's not you that's going in, is it?' asked Peggy, as though that disposed of his claim to interfere. 'And you needn't tell me I'm dishonourable any more. It's dull. I'm going.'

In fact she had got to the handle of the door. She had grasped it when Tommy came and took hold of her arm.

'No, you don't!' he said.

For an instant Peggy thought that she would take offence. Tommy's rigidity of moral principle, within the limits of his vision, proved, however, too much for her. She still held the handle, but she leant against the door, laughing as she looked up in his face.

'Let go, Tommy! In short, unhand me!'

'Will you go, if I do?'

'That's what I want you to do it for,' Peggy explained, with a rapid and pronounced gravity.

Her eyes sparkled at him, her lips were mischievous, the waves of her hair seemed dowered with new grace. Perhaps there was something, too, in the general atmosphere of the flat that night. Anyhow the thought of vindicating moral principles and the code of honour lost the first place in Tommy's thoughts. Yet he did not let go of his prisoner.

With the change in his thoughts—did it betray itself on his face?—came a change in Peggy also. She was still gaily defiant, but she looked rather on the defensive too. A touch of timidity mingled with the challenge which her eyes still directed at him.

'It's not the least good lecturing you,' he declared.

'I don't know how you ever came to think you knew how to do it.'

'Peggy, am I never to get any forwarder?'

'Not much, I hope,' answered Peggy, with a stifled laugh.

He looked at her steadily for a minute.

'You like me,' he said. 'If you hadn't liked me, I should have been kicked out by now.'

'I call that taking a very unfair advantage,' murmured Peggy.

'Because you're not the sort of girl to let a man——'

'Then why don't you let go of my arm?'

This was glaringly illogical. It seized Tommy's premise and twisted it to an absolutely opposite conclusion. But Tommy was bewildered by the mental gymnastics—or by something else that dazzled him. He released her arm and stepped back almost ceremoniously. Peggy lifted her arm and seemed to study it for a second.

'That's nice of you,' she said. 'But'—her laugh rang out—'I'm going all the same!'

In an instant she had darted through the door. Tommy made as though he would follow, but paused on the threshold and pulled the door close again. Perhaps she could carry it off; he could not. He walked slowly back to the spindle-shanked chair and sat down again. Tommy's head was rather in a whirl, but his heart beat gaily. 'By Jove—yes!' he thought to himself. 'Give her time, and it's yes!'

Peggy, unrepentant, strode across the passage and stopped outside the sitting-room. Human nature would not stand it. She must listen or go in. She did not hesitate: in she went.

Airey was standing by the window; she saw but hardly noticed him. In the middle of the room was Trix Trevalla. But what a Trix! Peggy stood motionless a minute at the sight of her. Her quick eye took in the ring on Trix's finger, the sparkle of the diamonds on her wrist, the softer lustre of the pearls about her neck. The plain gown she wore showed them off bravely, and she seemed as though she were hung with jewels. Peggy recognised the jewels; the small boxes she knew also, and marked where they lay on the table. All that was the work of an instant. Her eyes returned to Trix and rose above the pearls to Trix's face. The hardness and the haggardness, the weariness and shame, all suspicion and all reserve, were gone from it.

The face was younger, softer; it seemed rounder and more girlish. The eyes glowed with a veiled brightness.

Peggy stood there on the threshold, looking.

At last Airey spoke to her; for Trix, though she met her eyes, said nothing and did not move from her place.

'Peggy,' he said, 'she's been with me. She's been where we went this afternoon. You know the way; you showed it to me.'

Now Trix Trevalla came towards her, a little blindly and unsteadily as it seemed. She held out both hands, and Peggy went forward a step to meet them.

'Yes, I've been. I think I've been to—to the soul shop, Peggy.' She threw herself in the girl's arms.

'Is it—is it all right?' gasped Peggy.

'It's going to be,' said Airey Newton.

She put Trix at arm's length and gazed at her. 'They look beautiful, and you look beautiful. I wonder if you've ever looked like that before!'

'It's all gone,' said Trix, passing her hand across her eyes. 'All gone, I think, Peggy.'

'Oh, I can't stay here!' cried Peggy in dismay. For her eyes too grew dim; and now she could no more have sung than yawned. She caught Trix to her, kissed her, and ran from the room.

'I beg your pardon; you were quite right, sir,' she said to Tommy. 'I never ought to have gone in.'

'But, I say, what's happened, Peggy?' Of another's sin it seems no such great crime to take advantage.

'Everything,' said Peggy, with a comprehensive wave of her arms. 'Everything, Tommy!'

'They've fixed it up?' he asked eagerly.

'If you don't feel disgraced by putting it like that—they have,' said Peggy, breaking into glad laughter again.

He rose and came near to her.

'And what are we going to do?' he inquired.

Peggy regarded him with eyes professedly judicial, though mischief and mockery lurked in them.

'As I don't think it's the least use waiting for them, I suggest that we go and have some dinner,' she said.

'That's not a bad idea,' agreed Tommy.

He turned quietly, took up his hat and stick, and went out into the passage; Peggy stayed a minute to put on a hat and jacket. She came out to join him then, treading softly and with her finger on her lips. Tommy nodded understanding, took hold of the handle of the baize door, and made way for her to pass. His air was decorous and friendly. Peggy looked at him, immeasurable amusement nestling in her eyes. As she passed, she flung one arm lightly about his neck and kissed him.

'Just to celebrate the event!' she whispered.

Tommy followed her downstairs with heart aglow.

CHAPTER XXV

RECONCILIATION

Barslett: Sept. 13.

My dearest Sarah,—I know how much you value my letters. I know more—how valuable my letters are to you. Only by letter (as I've mentioned before) can I come near telling you the truth. In your presence, no! For aren't you, your dear old stately self, in the end, a—(so glad there are hundreds of miles between us!)—a splendid semi-mendacity?

I have just answered Trix's brief note. Here I wrote just as I should have spoken: 'I'm sure you'll be so happy, dear,' above my breath; 'why, in Heaven's name, does she do it?' under the same. Trix was curt. She marries 'Airey Newton, the well-known inventor'! Little Peggy was rather more communicative; but Peggy is an enthusiast, and (politics apart) I see no use for the quality. 'The well-known inventor'! I never heard of the man. *Ça n'empêche pas*, by all means. Shall we say 'Like to like'? Trix was rather a well-known inventor in her day and season—which is the one from which we are all precariously recovering. (How's the marital liver?) I wonder if we've got to say 'Like to like' in any other way, Sarah? You are no philosopher. You abound in general rules, but haven't a shred of principle. I will instruct you in my old way. But first I must tell you that Audrey is positively improving. She coquetted the other night! The floor creaked, as it seemed to me, but it bore well; and she did it. The Trans-Euphratic is, as you are aware, active even in the

dead season. I fancy the Trans-Euphratic helps Audrey. There are similarities, most especially in a certain slowness in getting under way. The Trans-Euphratic is going to get there. An American engineer who came down to Barslett the other day, and said he had always dreamed of such a place (he was sallow and thin), told me so. Audrey's going to get there too. Now isn't she? Don't say it's labour wasted!

I digress. Listen, then :—

Lord B.: Do you—er—know a Mr. Airey Newton—Newton, Viola?

Myself: Very slightly. Oh, you're thinking of——?

Lord B.: I saw it in the daily paper. (He means the 'Times'—he doesn't know of any others.)

Myself (hedging): Curious, isn't it?

Lord B.: It will possibly prove very suitable—possibly. As we grow old we learn to accept things, Viola.

Myself (looking young): I suppose we do, Lord B.

Lord B.: For my own part, I hope she will be happy.

Myself (murmuring): You're always so generous!

Lord B. (clearing his throat): I am happy to think that Mortimer has recovered his balance—balance, Viola.

Myself: He'd be nothing without it, would he, Lord B.? (This needed careful delivery, but it went all right.)

Lord B. (appreciative): You're perfectly correct, Viola. (*Pause.*) Should you be writing to Mrs. Trevalla, express my sincere wishes for her happiness.

Now, considering that Trix knocked him down, isn't he an old dear of a gentleman?

But Mortimer? A gentleman too, my dear—except that a man shouldn't be too thankful at being rid of a woman! He showed signs once of having been shaken up. They have vanished! This is partly the prospect of the Cabinet, partly the family, a little bit Audrey, and mainly—*Me!* I have deliberately fostered his worst respectabilities and ministered to his profoundest conceits. As a woman? I scorn the imputation. As a friend? I wouldn't take the trouble. As an

aunt? I plead guilty. I had my purposes to serve. Incidentally I have obliterated Trix Trevalla. If he talks of her at all, it is as a converted statesman does of the time when he belonged to the opposite party (as most of them have). He vindicates himself, but is bound to admit that he needs vindication. He says he couldn't have done otherwise, but tells you with a shrug that you're not to take that too seriously.

Mortimer: We were fundamentally unsuited.

Myself (tactfully): She was. (What did I mean? Sheer, base flattery, Sarah!)

Mortimer: She had not our (*waving arm*)—our instincts.

Myself: I think I always told you so. [!!!]

Mortimer: I daresay. I would listen to nothing. I was very impetuous. (Bless him, Sarah!)

Myself: Well, it's hardly the time—— (Do wise people ever finish sentences, Sarah?)

Mortimer: It is a curious chapter. Closed, closed! By the way, do you know anything of this Airey Newton?

Myself: A distinguished inventor, I believe, Mortimer.

Mortimer: So the papers say. (He 'glances at' them all.) What sort of man is he?

Myself: Oh, I suppose she likes him. Bohemian, you know.

Mortimer: Ah, yes, Bohemian! (*A reverie.*) Bo-hem-i-an! Exactly!

Myself: Is that Audrey in her habit?

Mortimer: Yes, yes, of course. Bohemian, is he? Yes! Well, I mustn't keep her waiting.

That is how I behave. 'O limèd soul that, struggling to be free'—gets other people more and more engaged! Tennyson, Sarah. And when they're quite engaged, whether it's in or out of the season, I'm going to Monte Carlo—for the same reason that the gentleman in the story travelled third, you know.

Oh, I must tell you one more thing. Running up to town the other day to get my hair—— I beg your pardon, Sarah! Running up to town the other day on business

connected with the family estates (a mortgage on my life-interest in the settled funds—no matter), who should shake me by the hand but Miss Connie Fricker! Where had I met Miss Connie Fricker? Once—once only. And where, Sarah? Everywhere, unless I had withstood you to the face! And I don't know why I did, because she's rather amusing. In fact, at your house, dearest. Long ago, I admit. She has come on much in appearance, and she's going to marry Beaufort Chance. I know she is, because she says it—a weak reason in the case of most girls, but not in hers. *Quod vult, valde vult.* (A motto in one branch of our family, meaning 'She won't be happy till she gets it.') I am vaguely sorry for our Beaufort of days gone by. These occurrences, Sarah, prejudice one in favour of morality. She has gleaming teeth and dazzling eyes (reverse the adjectives, if you like), and she has also—may I say it?—she has also—a bust! She says darling Beaufort is positively silly about her. My impression is that darling Beaufort is handling a large contract. (Metaphor, Sarah, not slang. Same thing though, generally.) That man wanted a slave; he has got—well, I shall call on them after marriage. I spoke to her of Trix Trevalla. 'I thought she'd quite gone under,' says Connie. 'Under *where*?' would have been my retort; but I'm weakly, and I thought perhaps she'd slap me. It's as pure a case of buying and selling as was ever done, I suppose; and if the Frickers gave hard cash I think they've got the worst of the bargain.

What s'the moral, Sarah? Not that it's any good asking you. One might as well philosophise to an Established Church (of which, somehow, you always remind me very much). 'Open your mouth and shut your eyes'—that's out of date. Our eyes are open, but we open our mouths all the wider. That's superficial! In the end, each to his own, Sarah. I don't mean that as you'd mean it, O Priestess of Precedence. But through perilous ways—and through the Barslett shrubberies by night, knocking down his lordship and half a dozen things besides—perhaps she has reached a

fine, a fine —— Perhaps! I hope so, for she had a wit and a soul, Sarah; and—and I'll call on them after marriage. And if that little compound of love and mischief named Peggy Ryle doesn't find twenty men to worship her and one who won't mind it, men are not what they were and women have lost their prerogative. Which God forbid! But, as my lord here would say, 'The change appears to me—humbly appears to me—to be looming—looming, Viola.'

Fol-de-rol, Sarah! Scotland as misty and slaughterous as ever? You might be a little bit nice to Mrs. Airey Newton. You liked her, and she liked you. Yes, I know you! Pretences are vain! Sarah, you have a heart! *J'accuse!*

Yours,
V. B.

As on a previous occasion, Mrs. Bonfill ejaculated 'Tut!' But she added, 'I'm sure I wish no harm to poor Trix Trevalla.'

It is satisfactory to be able to add that society at large shared this point of view. It is exceedingly charitable towards people who are definitely and finally out of the running. Those in the race run all; they become much more popular when it is understood that they do not compete for a prize. There was a revulsion of feeling in Trix's favour when the word went round that she was irredeemably ruined and was going to throw herself away on a certain Airey Newton.

'Who is he?' asked Lady Glentorly, bewildered but ready to be benevolent.

'Excuse me, my dear, I'm really busy with the paper.'

If Trix's object had been to rehabilitate herself socially, she could have taken no more politic step than that of contracting an utterly insignificant marriage. 'Well, we needn't see anything of *him*,' said quite a number of people. It is always a comfort to be able to write off the obligations that other folks' marriages may seem to entail.

Mr. Fricker had one word to say.

'Avoid her virtues and imitate her faults, and you'll get on very well with your husband, Connie.'

'Oh, I don't want to hear anything more about her,' cried Connie defiantly.

His pensive smile came to Fricker's lips.

'These little fits of restiveness—I don't mean in you—are nothing, Connie? You said you could manage him.'

'So I can—if you won't say things when he's there.'

'I'm to blame,' said Fricker gravely. 'But I'm fond of you, Connie.'

She broke out violently, 'Yes, but you wish I'd been rather different!'

'Live and let live, Connie. When's the wedding-day?'

She came to him and kissed him. Her vexation did not endure. Her next confidence amused him.

'After all, I've only got to say "Trix," and he's as quiet as a lamb,' she whispered, with her glittering laugh.

It is hopelessly symptomatic of social obscurity to be dining in London in September—and that as a matter of course, and not by way of a snatch of food between two railway stations. Yet at the date borne at the top of Lady Blixworth's notepaper something more than a dinner, almost a banquet, celebrated in town an event which had taken place some hundreds of miles away. Lady Blixworth had blessed the interval between herself and her dearest Sarah, opining that it made for candour, not to say for philosophy. Something of the same notion seemed to move in Miles Childwick's brain.

'In electing to be married in the wilds of Wales,' he remarked as he lit his cigarette, 'our friends the Newtons have shown a consideration not only for our wardrobes—a point with which, I admit, I was preoccupied—but also for our feelings. Yet we, by subscribing a shilling each towards a wire, deliberately threw away the main advantage of the telegraphic system. We could have expressed our aspirations for sixpence; as it is, we were led into something perilously like discussion. Finally, at Mrs. John's urgent

request, and in order not to have sixpence left on our hands, we committed ourselves to the audacious statement that we had foreseen it from the first.'

'So I did—since Airey's dinner,' declared Mrs. John stoutly.

'A delusion of your trade, Mrs. John. For my part I hope I have something better to do than go about foreseeing people's marriages.'

'Something different, old fellow,' Arty suggested, with an air of being anxious to guard the niceties of the language.

'I wonder if I could write a story about her,' mused Mrs. John, unusually talkative.

'I have so often told Mrs. John in print—anonymously, of course, because of our friendship—that she can't write a story about anything, that I sha'n't discuss the particular case. As a general principle, I object to books about failures. Manson, do you take an interest in humble tragedies?'

'Only in a brief marked two and one,' said Manson Smith.

'Exactly! Or in a par at seven-and-six.'

'Or perhaps in a little set of verses—thrown off,' murmured Arty Kane.

'Who's talking about tragedies?' called Peggy from the other end. 'Elfreda and Horace are splendidly happy. So will Trix and Airey be.'

'And—I am sorry to mention it,' smiled Tommy Trent, 'but the latter couple will also be uncommonly well off.'

'The only touch of poetry the thing ever had, gone out of it!' grumbled Arty resentfully.

'Listen to the voice of the Philistine!' advised Miles, pointing at Tommy. 'For the humiliating reason that he's generally right.'

'No!' ejaculated Mrs. John firmly.

'That is, we shall all come to think him right. Time will corrupt us. We shall sink into marriage, merit, middle age, and, conceivably, money. In a few years we sha'n't be

able to make out for the lives of us what the dickens the young fools do want.'

'Is this a *séance*?' demanded Arty Kane indignantly. 'If the veil of the future is going to be lifted, I'm off home.'

'Fancy bothering about what we shall be in ten years!' cried Peggy scornfully, 'when such a lot of fine things are sure to happen in between! Besides, I don't believe that anything of the sort need happen at all.'

The idea rather scandalised Mrs. John. It seemed to cut at the root of a scientific view of life—a thing that she flattered herself might with due diligence be discovered in her published, and was certainly to be developed in her projected, works.

'Experience, dear Peggy——' she began, with a gently authoritative air.

Miles laid a firm hand on her wrist and poured her out some more champagne; this action might be construed as an apology for his interruption. At any rate he offered no other: after all, Mrs. John was accustomed to that.

'Experience, dear Peggy—to adopt the form of expression used by my honourable friend, which commends itself to all sections of the House—(you mustn't laugh when you're complimented, Peggy!) experience, dear Peggy, enjoys two significations—first, the things that happen; secondly, what you or I may be pleased to think they mean. I have no remedy ready on the spot for the first; the cure for the second is very simple, as many great men have pointed out.'

'What is it?' asked Mrs. John rebelliously.

'Don't think so, Mrs. John.'

'What, reconstruct all your theories——?'

'Now did I say anything of the kind?' he demanded despairingly.

Peggy leant forward with eager eyes.

'Stop!' interposed Arty Kane imperiously. 'I will not be told any more that the world is full of happiness. It's

nothing to me one way or the other if it is, and there's an end of it.'

Peggy leant back again, smiling at Tommy Trent.

'Any other point of view would be ungracious to our friends to-night,' said Tommy with a laugh. It appeared rather as though it would be unsuited to his own mood also.

'One thing at least we may be sure of,' said Miles, summing up the discussion with a friendly smile. 'We shall none of us do, or be, or feel, at all approximately what we think we shall. You may say what you like, but there's plenty of excitement in it. Unless you're dull yourself, there's no dulness in it.'

'No, there's no dulness in it,' said Peggy Ryle. 'That is the one thing to be said.'

Would Lady Blixworth have echoed that from Barslett? She would have denied it vigorously in words; but could anything be dull so long as one had brains to see the dulness —and a Sarah Bonfill to describe it to?

Peggy walked off home with Tommy. Nobody questioned, or seemed inclined to question, that arrangement now. Even Miles Childwick looked on with a smile, faintly regretful perhaps, yet considerably amused. He linked his arm in Arty Kane's and the two walked along the Strand, discussing the permutations of human feeling. There seems no need to follow their disquisition on such a well-worn subject. It is enough to catch a fragment from Miles. 'The essence being reciprocity——' was all a news-vendor got for his offer of the late edition.

'It's far too fine to drive,' Peggy declared, picking her way round a small puddle or two, left by a goodly summer shower. 'Have you plenty of time?'

'Time enough to walk with you.'

She put her arm in his. 'So that's all over!' she said regretfully. 'At least, I don't see how Trix is going to do anything else that's at all sensational.'

'I should think she doesn't want to,' said Tommy soberly.

'No, but——' She turned her laughing face to him. 'When is something else going to begin, Tommy? I'm all ready for adventures. I've spent all my money——'

'You've spent——?'

'Now don't pretend to be surprised—it's all gone in frocks, and presents, and things. But—— Why, you never asked me where I got my necklace!'

'If you wore the Koh-i-Noor should I ask you where you got it?'

'Airey sent it to me to-day. I refused it from him before, but to-day I'm going to keep it. Because of what it means to him, you know.' She pushed her cloak a little aside and fingered the pearls. 'Yes, the money's all gone,' she went on, rather pleased apparently; 'and there's no more from poor dear uncle, and—and Airey Newton won't live in Danes Inn any longer!'

Tommy was silent; he was not silent altogether without an effort, but silent he was. She pressed his arm for a moment.

'Will you be promoted to Airey Newton's place?' she asked.

'But why only tea?' said Tommy.

She waited a little before she answered.

'What should you say,' she asked at last, 'if I ever changed?' She did not tell him from what: in words she had never told him, and in words he had never asked.

'I should wait for you to change back again,' said he. Was he the man that in Lady Blixworth's opinion the situation needed?

Peggy was eager in her explanation, but she seemed a little puzzled too.

'I know how much it is to ask,' she said, 'and there's no bond, no promise from you. But somehow it seems to me that I must see some more. Oh, there it all is, Tommy—waiting, waiting! Trix has made me feel that more and more. Was she all wrong? I don't know. Airey was there in the end, you see. And now there are all sorts

of things behind her, making—making a background to it. I don't want all she's had; but, Tommy, I want some more.'

He heard her with a sober smile; if there were a touch of sadness in it, there was understanding too. They had come to her door in Harriet Street, and she stopped on the threshold.

'I sha'n't starve. You'll be there at tea-time,' said she with an appealing smile.

His man's feeling was against her. It was, perhaps, too much to ask of him that he should sympathise fully with her idea; he saw its meaning, but its meaning could not be his ideal. He would have taken her now at once, when, as his thoughts put it, the bloom was fresh and she had rubbed so little against the world. The instinct in her and the longings which bore her the other way were strange to him.

She knew it; the timidity of her beseeching eyes told that she asked a great thing—a thing that must be taken on faith, and must try his faith. Yet she could not but ask. The life of to-day was not yet done. Coming now, the life of to-morrow would come too soon. Very anxiously she watched his struggle, perhaps with an undefined yet not uncertain apprehension that its issue would answer the question whether he were in truth the man to whom she must come back, whether they two would in the end make terms and live as one. What her heart asked was, Could freedom and love be reconciled? Else, which must go to the wall? She feared that she might be forced to answer that question. Or would he spare it her?

Another moment wore away. His brows were knit into a frown; he did not look at her. Her eyes were on his, full of contending feelings—of trust and love for him, of hope for herself, it may be of a little shame that she must put him to such a trial. At last he turned to her and met her gaze with a friendly cheerful smile.

'Go out into the world and have your fling, Peggy. Take

your heart and mine with you; but try to bring them both back to me.'

She caught his hand in hers, delighted that she could go, enraptured that his face told her that he trusted her to go.

'Yes,' she whispered, 'I shall come back with both, because, Tommy, you have such great, great faith in me. I shall come back. But'—her voice rose again in untrammelled gaiety—'But go I must for a little while. There's so much to see!'

THE END

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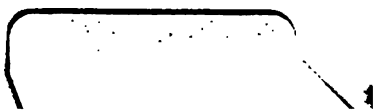
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